

The PRAIRIE PATROL



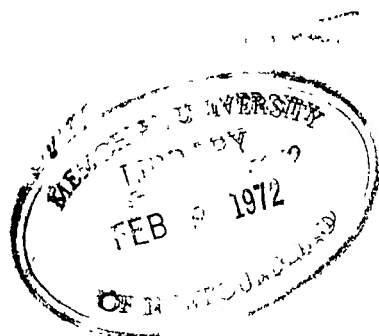
HAROLD BINDLOSS

EX LIBRIS



DR. GEORGE B. SWENSON

270519



25 11 1

1

THE PRAIRIE PATROL

6

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

RANCHER JIM
THE MAN AT WILLOW RANCH
LARRY OF LONESOME LAKE
THE FRONTIERSMAN
MYSTERY REEF
THE LONE HAND
THE DARK ROAD
THE GHOST OF HEMLOCK CANYON
THE BROKEN TRAIL
PINE CREEK RANCH
PRAIRIE GOLD
CROSS TRAILS
CARSON OF RED RIVER
GREEN TIMBER
THE WILDERNESS PATROL
THE BUSH-RANCHER
NORTHWEST!
THE MAN FROM THE WILDS
THE BUCCANEER FARMER
THE LURE OF THE NORTH
THE WILDERNESS MINE
WYNDHAM'S PAL
HARDING OF ALLENWOOD
ALTON OF SOMASCO
THE GREATER POWER
THE DUST OF CONFLICT

31-1193

The **PRAIRIE PATROL**

By
HAROLD BINDLOSS



FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
NEW YORK **MCMXXXI**

COPYRIGHT, 1931, BY FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced without the written permission of the publishers.

PUBLISHED IN ENGLAND UNDER THE TITLE
"THE LEAN YEARS"

Published, January 8, 1931
Second Printing, February 13, 1931
Third Printing, April 13, 1931

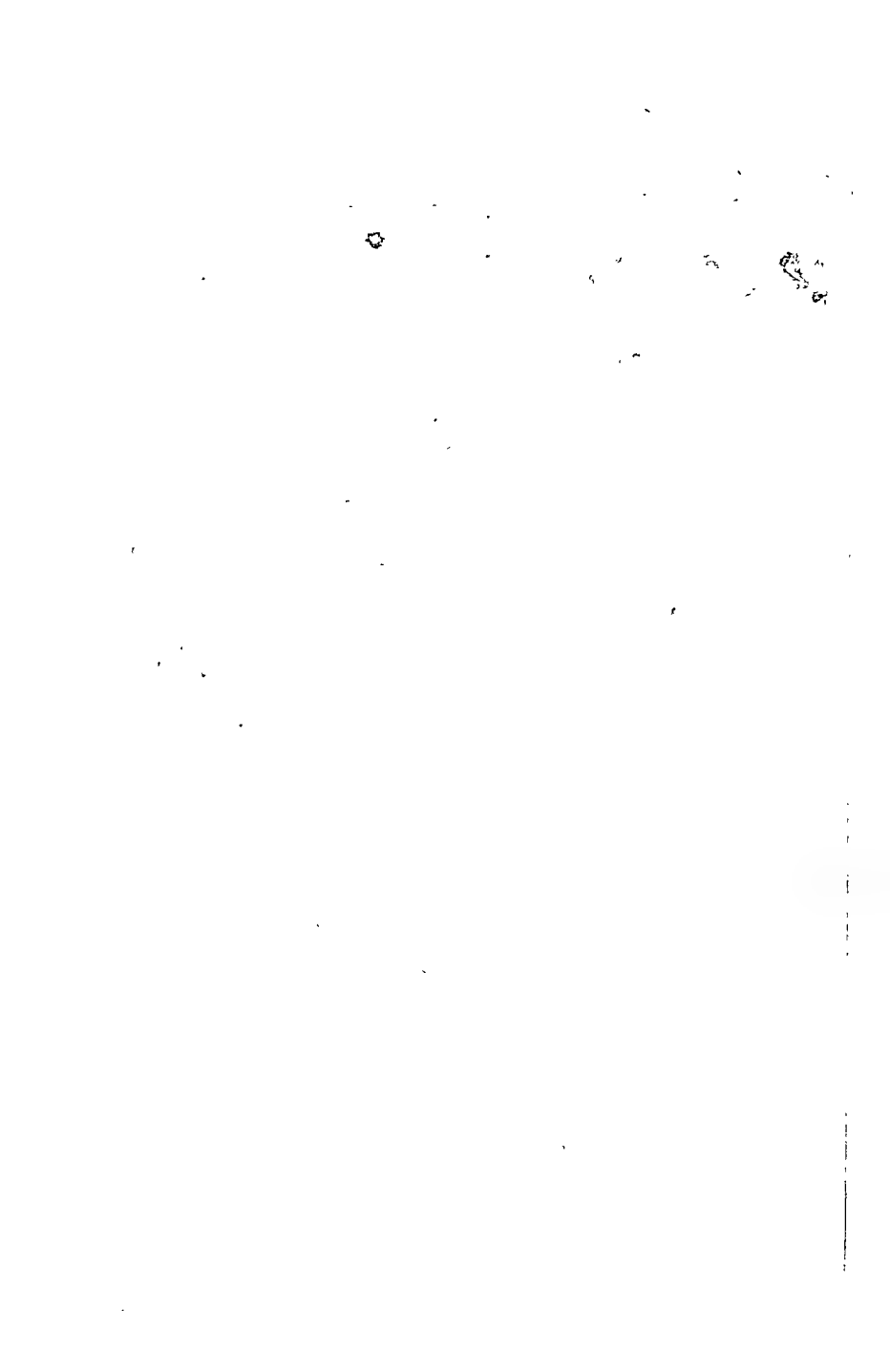
Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
PROLOGUE	1
I THE CRANE LAKE TRAIL	7
II AT HARMON'S STORE	16
III BROKE	25
IV ASHTON BURNS HIS WHEAT	34
V HOPE STANDS FAST	45
VI LATIMER'S PASSENGER	55
VII A CAVE-MAN'S HOSPITALITY	64
VIII HARMON'S LAST COMPETITOR	74
IX AN UNWILLING WITNESS	83
X RUTH'S COUNSELOR	92
XI MISS HARMON EXPERIMENTS	100
XII THE TRACK OF THE STORM	110
XIII ASHTON STARTS FOR WINNIPEG	120
XIV ASHTON PURSUES HIS SEARCH	129
XV RUTH TAKES A HOLIDAY	140
XVI CHRISTMAS UNDERGROUND	150
XVII THE WATCH BY THE RIVER	161
XVIII THE LONG ARM	169
XIX WARING'S PIOUS RESOLVE	177

CHAPTER	PAGE
XX AT LOWEST EBB	188
XXI A RICH YOUNG MAN	199
XXII THE EASY LINE	209
XXIII WILSHAW GOES EAST	220
XXIV MRS. HORE AT HOME	229
XXV IN THE FRONTIER VEIN	241
XXVI ASHTON TAKES A FRESH KNOCK	251
XXVII JANE COMES HOME	261
XXVIII MISS HARMON TAKES THE TRAIL	271
XXIX SUNDAY AFTERNOON	281
XXX THE BROKEN TRAIL	291
XXXI WILSHAW MAKES IT	300

THE PRAIRIE PATROL



THE PRAIRIE PATROL

PROLOGUE

WHERE Harmon built his ship-lap store at Glencoyne, thirty miles from the railroad, an up-to-date Hudson's Bay grocery and three grain elevators now front the branch track. A local train runs daily down the Clearwater, and one reaches Winnipeg some time next afternoon. The telephone service is better than the service in some important English towns, and one can telegraph cheap night-letters. Where Mother Olsen laboriously sorted the bi-weekly mail in her dark back store, one now goes up to the post-office by white marble steps, and in the spacious hall the desks are polished hardwood and the rails shining brass. Minna Olsen is long since gone, and Harmon went swiftly by the road some oppressors go.

The hotel opposite the station is brick, and a deep veranda, four or five feet above the sidewalk, occupies its front. The McBride House does not claim to be fashionable, but the food is good, and the three daily meals are served at the proper minute, and the tables as punctually cleared. In consequence, a late arrival must wait for the next meal. You dine (or take supper) by the American, one-charge, plan; and by contrast with the cost of rent and labor, hotels in the wheat belt are perhaps the cheapest in the world.

In the rather bleak hall, a bull moose's head and a por-

trait of the recent landlord front the door. Technically, perhaps, the drawing and coloring are not good, but the artist could seize a likeness, and one imagines his model's face carried the stamp of character. A medallion on the gold frame states the picture was presented by public subscription to Sergeant John McBride, on his retiring from the Royal North-West Mounted Police. The Canadian Government afterwards changed the force's title, but its traditions stand.

McBride's lined skin is a duskier red than his red coat. His cheek bones are rather prominent, and the face is something of the Indian type, although Mack was born in Ulster, and his mother was a Galloway Scot. His glance is Indian and the blue eyes are inscrutable, until one senses their keen watchfulness. The mouth is very firm. A man like that might have been tyrannical; McBride was a philosopher and a friend of all who needed help. People who knew him state he sometimes talked like a poet, which is not perhaps an Ulsterman's habit, but one might picture his cogitating in the Kipling vein. He acknowledged himself Presbyterian, but the Episcopalian and Methodist ministers claimed their part at his funeral.

Glencoyne has now three wooden churches, with square towers, in which a large round hole is cut near the top, and an ambitious building carries the Y.M.C.A. triangle. There is a poolroom, but the saloon was shut long since, and in the evening, when the train has gone, gossips drift about between the Y.M.C.A. and the hall of the McBride House. One is perhaps as decorous as the other, and in Western Canada you may meet your friends at a hotel without an obligation to call for a drink, even in the localities where hard drinks are supplied. Sometimes the privilege has drawbacks for the house's proper guests.

Where McBride followed the prairie trail, a graded road, of a sort, goes to the main Canadian Pacific track, and one can hire a second-class automobile at the road-service house. To hire a team and rig is harder, and but a few young bloods use stirrups and saddle, for the motorcycle has pushed the old-time bronco firmly off the road.

The settlement is not romantic, and the settlers live by trade and industry. Their business is to supply the farmers with machines and food and clothes; but except when Louis Riel and his half-breeds rebelled against Dominion rule, the Canadian West perhaps was never conspicuously wild. For one thing, the Royal North-West's hand was firm, and when their patrols rode into a settlement gamblers and gunmen left.

Glencoyne is not yet important, and like numerous other settlements, scattered for five hundred miles across the wheat belt, it is rather useful than picturesque. When one arrives by road, a board by the first house strikes a typical note, and states that the fine for spitting on the sidewalk is five dollars. Its complement might with advantage be fixed at the station yard, and warn state-aided emigrants that without labor nothing is to be got.

For the most part, the young folk are persuaded the town will grow like Winnipeg and Saskatoon, and if you arrive, for example, from New York or Montreal, you must not boast but rather indicate that you are willing to weigh Glencoyne's superior claims. The boys are a keen, optimistic, and as a rule, friendly lot; frank, with a sort of naïve frankness one does not remark in England, and, if they do not like you, frankly rude. In the Northwest one states one's views, and does not apologize.

Their clothes are good, and although none is perhaps extravagant, all have got a useful job. The recklessly

ambitious pack their trunks and start for the United States. They are muscular, and hardened by wind and frost, but as a rule they carry more weight than their fathers, who bore a sterner strain. When Glencoyne sprang from the prairie, the men, like the years, were lean. Lines carved by thought and labor seam the faces of the pioneers. Some are yet alive, and one knows them by their queer touch of Indian calm.

When they arrived, the wheat belt, for the most part, was a wilderness. Two hundred years earlier, French explorers had pushed up from the lakes and across the Missouri *couteau*; for long the Hudson's Bay's Scots factors had traded for furs by the Red River and the Assiniboine. Yet when Riel was hanged the half-breeds vanished like the buffalo, the Indians sullenly retired to their reserves, and the railroad from Fort William crept across a trackless plain.

For a time the freight cars' only load was the construction gangs' supplies. Before the company could reckon on traffic it must carry in the population it hoped to serve, and its agents scattered maps and propaganda in many languages. If a man had but health and five hundred dollars, he might, by preempting virgin soil, achieve independence and prosperity. Ontario farmers reckoned the thing impossible, but sometimes it was done.

The Canadian Pacific opened the wheat belt to Canada and the world. Until the famous road was cut for fourteen hundred miles through the Laurentian rocks and tangled forests, the West was no man's land. When the track crept on to the Rockies and the plains were surveyed by range and township and section, one square block was the nation's and the next, on the north side, the company's. A settler could preempt a Government quarter-section for

a registration fee; at the beginning he might buy railroad land, near the line, for five dollars an acre.

At length the road was open and the settlers came; from Ontario and Michigan, from England and all the countries of Europe where poverty pushed on the best and worst. The *Sardinian* was the fastest boat, and in ten days from Liverpool she landed her battered passengers at Quebec. As a rule, her load was four thousand tons of railroad iron, and when she plunged across the steep Atlantic combers, the emigrant pens in the dark 'tween-decks broke up, and helpless women and children rolled about the filthy planks. The railroad handled them better, for the C.P. colonist cars were new and large, and, when they started, clean. In four or five days, the frowsy, exhausted load was dumped at the Winnipeg immigration sheds.

A week or two afterwards the farmer settler reached the spot he had, at an agency five thousand miles off, chosen for his home. As a rule, he saw a sweep of virgin grass, as lonely and level as the sea. There was no coal; the bluffs where he must cut cordwood might be behind the horizon. He must dig for water, which was often alkaline. Moreover, unless a house were built and food and fuel stored when the snow fell, he must freeze. Some did freeze. There was no support to be got from the State or public charity. In the land of promise, one must stand on one's own feet.

Some who had fixed on the Park country, saw rolling plain, dotted by little woods and shallow lakes, and watered by slow, looping creeks. In summer, if the north-west wind was not boisterous, the land had a tranquil charm; but the haul to the railroad was long, and frost,

that cut the ripening wheat, came sooner than on the plain.

None had much money. All some had was muscular strength and pluck, and most of them did not know their job. They were starkly up against it, and for long the fight was hard, but they conquered. They built Glen-coyne and a thousand settlements of the sort. And, back from the railroads in belts where land yet is cheap, fresh pioneers, with better tools, break the trail for Canada's advance.

CHAPTER I

THE CRANE LAKE TRAIL

SILVER light touched the wide flats through which Clearwater Creek runs to the Assiniboine. The month was August, but the full moon, pushing up from behind the prairie's edge, glimmered frosty red, and the evening was cold. In the calm, the jingle of steel was musical and the beat of horses' feet carried far. Somewhere in the background, a coyote howled.

Sergeant McBride's black figure cut the light like an old Daguerreotype. His pose changed smoothly with his horse's stride, and about him floated the smell of peppermint, crushed by iron shoes. His sun-faded tunic was British red and gold; only his big Stetson hat was Colonial, and although the stores began to sell Winchesters, the rifle, jolting softly in its leather bucket, was an English Martini. The Royal North-West were satisfied to use a single-shot weapon, and the rifle was rather a symbol of authority; moreover, when they were forced to shoot, their aim was good.

In front, as the moon got higher, the plain rolled farther back. But for a spot two or three miles off, where gray shadow might indicate a *coulée*, the flat, shining grass went on, as if forever, like a moonlit sea.

The Royal North-West patrolled in couples, and constable Waring rode by his chief's hand. He had not, as a rule, a sergeant for his companion, but McBride was something like a touring magistrate, and adjudicated on cases that did not come to court. Waring imagined

the officers at Regina knew and approved, for he had begun to think Canadian justice rather ethically than meticulously just. Anyhow, old Mack knew men, and where a dispute might baffle the lawyers he did not hesitate, and his word went. One might, of course, appeal to a superintendent, but none did so. Moreover, he was a horseman. Waring knew, because in the Old Country his first present was a pony, and he had ridden with a famous hunt.

McBride sometimes speculated about Waring's grounds for joining the police, but it did not matter, and he knew some others of his sort. The boy had qualities, and his hands were good. You could trust him with a young horse, and he could hold a Martini straight although the pull-off was stiff. When he forgot he was Mr. Waring, he'd be a useful policeman.

The sergeant turned his head. The moon was now polished silver, and in the flooding light the stars were dim. McBride frowned; he would sooner see the round white clouds roll along before the northwest wind, as they rolled all summer.

"There are folks who'll be sorry for the rising of this moon, and them on the low ground will be sorriest," he remarked. "In the Old Country they will tell ye the full moon ripens the corn; but in Ireland corn is oats, and the back-end nights are warm. And the west wind blowing soft as milk."

"Our corn is wheat," said Waring. "We get fifty bushels to the acre on our English clay. In Assiniboia, they get sixteen bushels, and sometimes twenty if their luck is extra good. Slow oxen for the breaking, and when you turn the summer fallow you use horses like hack-

neys. I wish the boys could see the furrows cut by a British Clydesdale team."

"And an American plow?" said McBride. "When ye are poor, ye must use the tools ye can afford to buy. Then a poor man cannot keep an extra team for his driving rig, but he must haul stuff from the railroad and he must scour the plain for hay. A Clydesdale's big, like an elephant; I would not say he's fast."

Waring laughed. "Oh, well, you can get good plows in England, for example, in Lincolnshire; but it's not important. You are a sort of apologist for all that's Assiniboian; a booster is perhaps the word. Yet you're certainly not Canadian."

At the guardroom McBride was sergeant; on patrol he was, for the most part, a calm, and sometimes humorous, philosopher. The pride of his hot youth was long since gone.

"In Kansas, when I had not much sense, I knocked out a fighting cowboy who called me *Mick*. Six foot he was and hard, but I took his gun and lathered him with his cartridge belt. A boy's exploit, and I am not proud av it. My father was an Ulsterman, and my mother, from Galloway, had me trained in the maxims av the Scots Free Kirk. And ye would not think them hot-blooded folk."

Waring did not, but he imagined the fight in Kansas was something of a fight. An Ulster Scot was not the sort of antagonist one carelessly provoked. For all that, Mack's native dourness was gone; it looked as if he had mellowed with advancing age.

The trail curved down to the *coulée* where the Clear-water runs. The valley was wide and shallow, and willow bushes bordered the creek. On the farther slope willows

and poplars grew ten or twelve feet high, and at one spot lights shone behind the trees. In the hollow, Waring felt the cold damp on his skin. There was no mist, and the lights in the bluff shone clearly, but on the Western tablelands frost comes first where the ground is low.

Glencoyne was not at the beginning an attractive spot, but the poplars were some shelter from arctic storms, and the Clearwater was less tainted by a stuff like Glauber's salts than some other creeks. Riding up from the *coulée*, one first remarked the rubbish dump, and where one burns coal-oil, and food is for the most part canned, rusty cans are numerous. For thirty or forty yards the trees had been chopped back from the wheel-torn street, along one side of which two planks went for a sidewalk that all must keep when the mud was a foot deep in the spring. The other side was open plain, since a Western settlement does not for some time cross the track or trail.

Eight or nine houses were built of ship-lap boards, and mosquito gauze enclosed the front verandas. They looked rather like dolls' houses, and at the eaves one could touch the shingles on the roof. Other builders had used logs, the largest they could find in the neighboring bluffs, since the length to which a birch trunk grows the proper thickness fixed the house's size. As a rule, two small rooms occupied the ground floor, and one went up a ladder to the bedroom in the roof. In winter the pipe from the kitchen stove tempered the arctic cold.

Nobody cultivated flowers and smooth grass; Glencoyne was starkly utilitarian. Potatoes grew in some garden lots, each plant springing from its separate hill, but as a rule a log pile, a saw horse, and a cordwood stack occupied the open yards. Ship-lap stables closed two sides of the livery yard, in which two or three broken

wagons, a thin-wheeled buckboard, and rigs whose names are now forgotten fronted the weather. Harmon's store and implement warehouse, Mrs. Olsen's grocery and post-office, and the Murchison House hotel occupied the next block. Glencoyne stopped there. All beyond was wilderness.

Lights yet burned behind the windows, and at one or two spots groups on the sidewalk smoked and talked. When the beat of horses' feet pierced the evening calm the loungers turned their heads. The horsemen's figures cut the light; one knew the Stetson hats, the dull jolt of rifle butts, the creak of leather, and the jingle of steel. Only the prairie patrol; old Mack and a trooper riding the Crane Lake Trail.

"Good-night to you, Sergeant," one shouted; and another, who had fought at Battleford, got on his feet.

"Pass, friend. All's well," he said.

McBride lifted his hand and rode up the street, but he stopped for a moment by the Harmon store and gave Waring an envelope.

"For Harmon's hand, and get the tobacco and the other truck ye want. I'll wait by the trail forks, and ye can stop for a few minutes, but ye'll guard your tongue."

At the trail forks, where a few willows and wild currants grew, he got down, tied his horse, and unrolled his thick blanket. Ten years since, he would not have bothered; but since sun-up he had ridden forty miles, and he began to feel age on him. The cold, however, had banished the mosquitoes, and he lighted his pipe and mused.

Harmon would be friendly with the young fella', and if he took the girl's fancy, she might try her charm on him. They had seduced another constable, and Mack was

forced to move the boy to a guardroom in the West. Waring had a high spirit and the pride of a thoroughbred. If he went straight, he might go far, but since he was flesh and blood, one did not know. Well, the lad must stand on his own feet, and Harmon might take the wrong way with a fastidious Englishman.

McBride pictured Harmon's arrival, with all his stock-in-trade on board a Clover-leaf wagon. Wilshaw helped him build his shack, and they had trouble to get the logs. It was but six or seven years since, and old Hans Olsen supplied the boys' groceries. Now Hans was dead and Harmon had a ship-lap store and an implement yard. McBride reckoned the livery, to some extent, was his, and he controlled the Murchison House. Nobody else at Grencoyne had got richer, but it was in the lean years Harmon's sort got fat.

When McBride was young, one of the sort flourished in County Tyrone; spinning like a spider, in his back shop, nets for poor folks' entanglement. All in the village were his debtors, and you could not get a job but by Connor's leave. They talked about English oppressors! Ireland's worst oppressors were some Irishmen. If you were cunning and watched your step, you might go for some distance on dangerous ground; but when Connor took Kate Morrison's cottage and put her in the street he did not know where to stop. And Kate, the widow of an Orangeman!

McBride turned his head. Would the noise he heard be Waring's horse's feet? It was not. The rig was going south, and you could hear the wheels. The queer thing was, when one was young one looked in front, but when one was old one looked back.

Anyhow, when McBride and two more, at the dark of

the moon, broke Connor's door the road on which he started was longer than he knew. Their faces were masked, and they carried sticks. All they rather naïvely wanted was to persuade Connor he must let old Kate back and release two or three other debtors from unjust claims. They did not reckon on the fellow's jumping for a gun and Danny Learmont's getting some B-shot in his leg. Then Brady, Connor's orra man, arrived, and since the fellow sold farm tools, seized a turf-spade from the pile in the corner.

For all that, they beat him up, destroyed some groceries, and broke Connor's gun; and then it was time for the two who could walk to go. McBride took the road, and imagining the police would reckon on his steering for Derry, went the other way to Larne, where a Laird boat loaded cattle for Stranraer.

His mother's folk sent him to Coatbridge, and one who was at the ironworks got him a job in the bar mill. For two years he kept his post, and nobody bothered him. Waverley iron went to Canada, and when trade was bad the stock-keeper gave him a recommendation that got him a job at the Montreal rolling mills. At Montreal he sweated by the furnace where they soaked the white-hot puddled bars, and he was never warned for burning them; but the pay was better at Pittsburgh, and he went.

Pittsburgh was not like clean and spacious Montreal, but he held his job for three years; and then the big strike stopped the mills and he started for Omaha. Maybe he was not wise. The pay was good, and the boss roller trusted him, but he was a horse and cattle man, and one's proper job was the job one knew. The queer thing was, he'd made good at the ironworks. McBride knocked out his pipe and destroyed a mosquito.

The sergeant was modest. One might have bet on his making good anywhere, for he had inherited qualities that make for competence, and his father boasted they sprang from Cromwell's Ulster colonists. At all events he was Nordic. His hair was touched by red and his eyes were frosty blue.

From Omaha he drifted southwest, range-riding, across the cattle country. It was long since, and he disremembered where he went, but the cow towns had queer Spanish names and one or two were built of mud. In the end, he crossed the Sierras, and at San Francisco heard about the Alaska Commercial Company. McBride was tired of dust and heat, and they sent him to a desolate spot where for seven months the blockhouse was buried in the snow. In the woods you might see a moose pit, where a big bull had tossed out the snow, and when the timber wolves got after him, swept the circle's top with his horns.

He helped the agent buy skins: sea otter skins, when they could get them, from the Haidas and Aleuts. Sometimes they got a little gold, but all the coast Indians knew was, it came from another lot's hunting ground far up the big river that flows through the willow swale behind St. Michael.

For a time McBride was happy in the North; and then the agent's Russian half-breed wife made trouble. The agent was a white man, but he had age on him, and had stopped for long in the bitter cold and dark. McBride began to think the woman might use her Russian knife; in some circumstances, Marshall might use his gun, and if McBride risked another winter, when the snow melted all of them might be dead. The last boat for the south was at an inlet a hundred miles off, and he loaded a hand sledge.

"Sir," he said, "I'll be going while my shoes are good."

"Good luck t'you, Mack," said Marshall. "I'll not get as good a man."

That was all, for both of them understood, and the old wooden steamer landed him at Seattle, on Puget Sound. Then he took a job at the Hastings sawmill, and, by and by crossed the Rockies to Calgary, where he studied a notice on the guardroom door. The R.N.W.M.P. wanted men of good character who could ride and shoot. McBride asked for the officer in command, and was sworn for a constable.

The thing was queer. When he first started on the run, the Royal Irish searched the bogs for him. He had traveled the long roads across the Western world, and now he was sergeant in the Royal North-West. And they would presently retire him, with a record of useful service and a pension to his name. Well, well, he'd miss the beat of the horses' feet and the salt dust blowing when the prairie patrol went by.

In Ireland he took the road because he beat up the gorm-been man, whose greedy fingers fastened on all the poor folks had. It looked as if Harmon was another of the sort, but an R.N.W. sergeant must not use a club. The schemer must be let go as far as the law allowed; he was as cunning as a coyote, but some cunning folk did not know where to stop.

McBride got up. The drumming noise he heard marked Waring's advance. The boy would be pushing his horse along, for the spot where they had thought to camp was yet some distance off.

CHAPTER II

AT HARMON'S STORE

AS a rule, Harmon's store was open as long as he imagined a customer might be about, but the big lamps were extravagant, and, thirty miles from the railroad, coal-oil was not cheap. When Waring pushed back the door, the long room was dark and only the reflections from the small back office touched the end of the counter, where a girl folded some drygoods. Waring noted her smooth, swift movements. Pearl Harmon's touch was firm and competent, and she was a handsome girl.

Her body's curves balanced, and in a way toned down, its muscular solidity; when Harmon kept store at Glencoyne woman's dress was long and flowing, and Pearl carried herself with a sort of Amazonian grace. Her hair was thick, and, in the daylight, shining black; her large black eyes sparkled. She gave Waring a warning glance, and with a coquettish gesture indicated that the office was occupied. Waring smiled politely, but he did not know if he was flattered. He had, at all events, not wanted to engage Miss Harmon in confidential talk.

"I want some tobacco, tin-flag plug, and two or three other articles in this list, which a pal gave me," he said. "Then I have a document for Mr. Harmon."

"Come right in," somebody ordered.

Waring lifted a flap in the counter, and a strongly-built, large man looked up from his office desk. Harmon's hair and eyes and clothes were black, and a large, soft

black hat was on his head. He, however, had no coat, and Waring noted his fine white shirt and muscular arms. When Harmon looked at one he pushed out his firm jaw aggressively and knitted his thick brows as if he frowned.

"I mustn't disturb you," Waring remarked. "You might fill in the particulars asked for, and mail the form to Regina."

Harmon scornfully threw the document in a scrap basket.

"My job's to keep store. If the Government wants useless information, they can get some from their statistical bureau. If they think I'm bucking the taxes, they can send along and search."

"I have handed you the form," said Waring. "My business stops there."

"Why, that's so," Harmon agreed. "To know where you do stop is something and saves you trouble. But sit down and take a smoke while my girl weighs up your stuff. Maybe you'll take a drink? That cider is not for sale. A present from Owen Sound, where the boats start up the Lake, but it's the hardest stuff that's brewed in Ontario."

He indicated a small wooden keg, but Waring refused. For one thing, hard Ontario cider loosed one's tongue like whisky, and Harmon was not the sort of fellow to whom one talked at large. In order to be polite, however, he took an American cigarette from a packet that carried a duty stamp, and Harmon pushed across a box of English matches, which were almost as expensive as the cigarettes. Canadian matches were supplied in blocks from which one broke them off, and when they ignited, noiselessly, the smell carried for fifty yards. Their popular name was silent smellers.

"I have not much use for English goods, but their matches don't taste the tobacco, and I like a clean smoke," Harmon remarked. "You c'n put the box in your pocket, and if you have a cigarette case, you might load her up. Sure you won't take a drink?"

"Quite," said Waring, smiling. "I expect you know an R.N.W. private's and a C.P. locomotive engineer's drink is tea. If he's known to use another sort, he must look for another job."

He lighted the cigarette and pushed back the matchbox. The storekeeper probably knew he did not carry a cigarette case, and his invitation perhaps implied a sneer at English fastidiousness. In the Territories, one rolled one's cigarettes and used a cheap black Quebec shag that the plainsmen called buffalo dung.

"Well, well," said Harmon, as if he sympathized. "I reckon you got going at sun-up, and if the mosquitoes let you, you'll camp in a bluff. A dog's life, and the pay is small. Then there are no pickings to your job."

Waring looked up, rather sharply. He did not like his host, but he had stopped for a few minutes because he was tired, and he rather thought McBride had meant him to do so.

"There are no pickings, Mr. Harmon," he agreed in a cultivated voice, since he thought it might annoy the other. "Some police may take a bribe; the Royal North-West do not. Then, I doubt if Assiniboine farmers can afford to be generous. All they can do is to meet their storekeeper's bills."

Harmon's glance got grimly humorous. Waring thought he weighed him, but the storekeeper was not all his audience. He was conscious of the girl at the counter, and although she herself was indistinct, the

spot commanded the illuminated office. The soft rustle of fabric indicated that she had resumed her occupation, but sometimes for a moment or two the noise stopped.

Pearl, in fact, was interested, and with a touch of malicious humor she pictured her father's emotions. For all Harmon's dusky color, his methods were Nordic. Although he was subtle, he would sooner use force than cunning, and unless he knew rudeness might cost him much, he hated to be polite. Yet he was willing to make good boast and threat. A bull of a man, but when he was savage his plunge was not wild. He pushed where a thrust hurt most, and trampled on his antagonist's tenderest spots.

Waring was another type: the type some Canadians hate on sight. Pearl knew him thoroughbred; he was marked by a queer, insolent gracefulness that she, on the whole, approved, particularly since she knew he did not pretend. The boys admitted the young fellow had some gall. Yet when he refused to drink with her father and pushed back his matches and cigarettes, he did not know whom he was up against. Pearl was intrigued, and to some extent attracted. Anyhow, to attract, and perhaps humiliate, the young Englishman might be some satisfaction.

She pictured the muscular and rather drunk Quebec lumberman, who arrived at their backwoods store in Ontario and demanded to see the *sale vaurien* who had reckoned up his bill. For perhaps half a minute he did see Harmon; and then he was knocked against the wall and trampled on the boards. Harmon had recently gone fishing, and since stranded logs and driftwood covered the river bank his boots were fitted with creeper spikes. The fight, however, was in a province where the Royal

North-West's jurisdiction did not go, and Harmon had but begun to carry weight.

Pearl knew the disputed bill correct. Her father, for all his greediness, did not cheat like that. He was a stern creditor, but the stuff he sold was good. At the beginning, good stuff and good service had persuaded the Assiniboine farmers to trade with him. Now they dared not try another plan.

In the meantime, Harmon studied Waring with a touch of indulgent humor that annoyed the young fellow.

"Well, well," he said, "maybe in winter keeping store is a softer job than hauling a hand-sled on the North trail and sleeping in the snow. F'r all that, it has some drawbacks, and the farmers' habit is not to meet their bills. If I get a few months behind, Montreal wholesalers charge me up ten per cent on mine. That's why I'm kind of worrying about the frost. We have had two pretty cold nights. Do you think much wheat is nipped?"

Waring's impulse was to mention two or three farms where damage had been done, but he hesitated. Old Mack had warned him to go cautiously.

"I expect the crops on high ground are not hurt. In the flats and on the *coulée* slope, I dare say some are touched; but you are Canadian and an old-timer."

"I don't ride the prairie," Harmon rejoined. "You would go by Wilmot's, and Jasper's place would be near your line."

"Wilmot gave us dinner; his wheat was all right. We passed a mile south of Jasper's, but his land is sandy, and I do not think he would be bothered by freezing damp."

"That's something. They are pretty useful customers, and I wouldn't like them to get a setback. Well, now, Mr. Waring, a police trooper on a fixed beat ought to

put himself as wise as possible, and a settlement store is quite a good spot for news. On a cold evening, you might like to take a smoke for ten minutes, and maybe some cheese and crackers, by the stove. The R.N.W. boys claim they're the settlers' friends. Why can't you be friendly?"

Waring got up. "You are kind, Mr. Harmon. I don't know if my round is fixed, and I doubt if the chiefs at Regina would approve my swapping news. You see, our business is rather to listen than to talk. After all, you ought, perhaps, to mail that document. The gentlemen who ask for the information are rather a persistent lot, and I don't want to bother you about it another time."

He paid for the articles he had bought. The store was dark, and he did not see the girl, but when he loosed his horse from the post by the sidewalk somebody touched his arm. Waring turned, and Miss Harmon gave him a smile. His first emotion was something like annoyance, but it melted, and he began to think Pearl and the moonlight harmonized. Her eyes and hair were dark as the night sky; she was shapely, and when she touched his horse's neck he noted her attractive pose and her arm's flowing line.

"The cigarettes and some English matches," she said. "You just can't refuse to take them from a girl."

"That is so, Miss Harmon. I mustn't pretend I want to refuse. And you are very kind."

"Now you are polite, Mr. Waring. I hope it doesn't hurt."

Waring laughed. "Well, I suppose I deserve it! A policeman on business patrol cannot use the rules he might like to use at another time. If you see what I mean——"

"If I studied it up, I might," said Pearl. "Of course, to ride the prairie is a responsible job. You have to find out where somebody's chickens went, and why another fellow didn't plow his fireguards the way he ought."

"We get worse jobs. However, you were putting up the drygoods, and I expect you noted Mr. Harmon's remarks and mine."

"Sure I did. I thought you had some gall, and I thought it good for Pop. He's a big man, trooper, but sometimes he reckons he's Boss unlimited. But what d'you do when you're not on patrol?"

"I don't know if it's important. At the guardroom I try to get the sleep I need, clean up my outfit, and boil my clothes. I have gone fishing."

"Look's like a dog's life," Pearl remarked. "Well, I guess only storekeepers and farmers bother about getting rich. The gentleman trooper is satisfied to beat the plains in the dust, and haul the hand-sled across the snow. Where he waves the flag nobody durst steal a turkey poult and nobody durst pull a gun. For all that, I know folks who don't love you as they ought."

Boards cracked in the store, and Pearl turned her head.

"Pop might come out to look for me, and maybe you ought to start. Well, if you would like some cheese and crackers when the evenings get cold and dark——"

She stole along the wall to the corner, laughed softly, and was gone. Waring got on his horse and frowned. The moon was getting high, and the Glencoyne folk were not yet in bed. Miss Harmon, no doubt, knew his stopping by the sidewalk might excite some curiosity, but she was willing to risk it, although, for no very obvious object, she afterwards pretended she must steal away. She had, of course, bantered him. He did not like to be

ridiculous, but when the banterer was an attractive girl—— Anyhow, before he was again at Glencoyne he imagined some time would go.

Harmon, pushing into the kitchen, saw Pearl shut down the stove.

"Did you and Constable Waring fix things nicely?" she inquired.

"You pretend you don't know?" said Harmon. "If the young fellow comes back for his schedule, keep him out of my sight, or for all he's a policeman I'll hit him with a club. Stretches his neck, and looks at me with a kind of pained surprise. 'Some police might take a bribe, Mr. Harmon; the Royal North-West do not.' Then he he-haws some more like that in his tired voice. I thought the breed was English, but we have a few in Montreal. Well, well; ten years since I'd have smashed the blasted pup."

Pearl gave him a sympathetic glance.

"Sure it's hard, Pop, but you have got to be resigned. Ten years since you were buck Harmon, and kept store for lumberjacks in the big wild woods, but you hadn't much of a bank-roll, and you hadn't put on fat. Then, you see, where the R.N.W. ride, lumber gang rules don't go. If you think about it, there's something to that. The fellows you put the screws to dassent beat you up."

Harmon laughed, a grim laugh, and stretched his muscular arms.

"I've not gone far downhill, but in a way, you're right. At one time I could use axe and peevie with the best choppers in Quebec. Two dollars a day, and the contractor charged you for your board! You get rich quicker when you use the scales and pen."

In the meantime, Waring pushed his horse along, and by and by joined McBride at the trail forks.

"Ye stopped some time," the sergeant remarked. "Looks as if Mr. Harmon's conversation interested ye."

"I was interested. If I had stopped much longer, I might have got annoyed. The fellow rather frankly tried to find out if I knew whose crops were frozen, if I might take a bribe, and if I was willing to look him up and give him any news I'd gathered on my round."

"He would," said McBride, dryly. "I would not deny he has qualities, but the art to soothe and lead ye gently is not wan. Mr. Harmon is a buck from the backwoods, and talks like his kind. If he had been Irish, in five minutes he'd have known all he wanted to know, and ye would not have suspicioned it. I hope ye satisfied the man."

"I tried to do so. Unless he's remarkably dull, he ought to see that nothing's doing. But when you think about it, he cannot be dull. He's the richest man at the settlement, and two or three of the best farms are really his."

"He might have wan or two more. If ye would be prosperous, ye cannot be a fool, but ye need not be conspicuously clever. Ye must know where ye want to go and put all your mind on keeping the road, and ye must dump the scruples that might keep ye back. Harmon is wan like that, and I would not say but he'll get his reward. But, we have seven miles to go and our horses are not fresh."

Drumming feet beat the turf; the noise got fainter, and the prairie patrol melted in the long sweep of grass.

CHAPTER III

BROKE

THE moon rose late, and in the falling dusk McBride stopped his horse at the top of a gentle rise. A mile or two back, the plain was level like a lake, and on the long incline one did not know one climbed, but at the top the horizon got suddenly wide. In front, small vague woods dotted the receding plain, and at one spot a pool reflected the pale-green sky. In the west a smear of dull red slowly faded.

All the lines were smoothly horizontal, the evening was warm, and Waring sensed the landscape's spacious calm. As a rule, calm is not Western Canada's dominant quality, but at length the rushing winds that blow down from the high plains while summer lasts had dropped, and the wheat belt was quiet in the early fall. In the background, however, flickering orange light marked a grass fire's path.

"The boys all have their guards plowed," said McBride. "Where the furrow's clean a fire cannot creep across, but we must count the rows and see the sod is right turned back. And sometimes it's the hard word we get. The Royal North-West are the settlers' friends. I reckon we are all the conscience some would be having."

Waring smiled. In a sense, old Mack's rule was patriarchal, but he calmly fronted decisions some superintendents might refer to Ottawa. He used a persuasive tongue, but all knew his hand was firm.

"Maybe Kevan will give us supper. Let's be going," he resumed.

In the dusk, nothing indicated that the ground dropped, but when Waring turned his head a black ridge a mile behind him cut the sky. Then he saw, in front, a light by a clump of trees, and he knew the dim oblong by the trail for ripening wheat. A minute or two afterwards he stopped his horse. At the homestead where he had thought to get supper a man and woman loaded a wagon.

The small square log-house rose starkly from the grass, and on the steps a tubular stable lantern burned with a steady flame. The man, pushing a cook-stove into the high wagon, stopped and fronted McBride as if he were embarrassed. He was thin and brown, and his look was moody. The woman, was not old, but her face was lined, and she carried the stamp of labor. On the whole, her glance was defiant. Waring noted the furniture and bedding neatly stacked in the wagon.

"Did you know we were quitting, Sergeant?" she asked.

"I did not, mistress. But that Jock is a friend of mine, it would have nothing to do with me. In two hours the moon will rise, and ye'll have a fine night for the road."

Waring doubted if he could as discreetly have framed the polite reply. Mack implied that he was not going to meddle and the road was open. The woman's look got softer.

"Light down and take a smoke," she said. "Loading up has tired me, and the team will stand."

Waring tied the horses and sat down in the grass; the others occupied the steps. He cut some plug tobacco, because when Mack was about he would sooner not smoke Miss Harmon's cigarettes.

"Well now, the trouble would be the wheat was nipped?" the sergeant inquired.

"Sure thing," agreed Kevan. "A week since, I reckoned Ogilvies would buy the lot for number one milling hard; now I doubt if she'll thrash out for chicken feed. Anyhow, I'm not going to thrash. I know when I've had enough."

He went to the house and, coming back, gave McBride four or five dry wheat heads, which the sergeant rolled in his hand.

"Is all like that?"

"Some's worse. When I built this house, I had most two thousand dollars, cash money, fastened in my belt. Nearest bank was at Brandon, and Harmon paid you interest on all you handed him. You can get your money from a bank, but when Harmon has the wad it melts. Hail cut my first crop and lightning killed a horse. A year gone; we'd grown a few potatoes, but I had to buy bacon and groceries for twelve months, and some winter feed for the team. Next crop was frozen, and two or three more. Red Fife's good milling wheat, but when spring is late, she doesn't ripen soon enough."

McBride agreed. There was the main drawback the farmers must front, and Western Canada's progress depended on its removal. For three or four hundred miles, the black alluvial gumbo is perhaps the best wheat soil in the world, but spring is late, and in early summer the frost yet lurks not far below the surface. For a few scorching weeks, the thaw feeds the wheat's deep roots; and then, sometimes in August, the thermometer falls.

"Harvest frost is queer," said the sergeant. "Yez cannot tell where it will strike, and I've known it pass the low spots and spoil the crops wan might think were

safe. Yours might stand, with never an ear the worse, an' your neighbor's gone. But the botanists are at work; cross-fertilizing and saving the right seed. They will give ye wheat that ripens before the frost can bite."

"We want it now," said Kevan. "Quick-ripening seed won't help us when we're dead. All my crops weren't frozen, but wheat was cheap, and I must haul the stuff thirty miles to the elevator. The bad years swallowed all I'd made in the good, and when I reckoned up with Harmon I was in his debt."

"Three years we worked for black Harmon," said Mrs. Kevan in a dreary voice. "When we got a crop, he took the lot, and he gave us bacon and damaged groceries. So long as he could sweat us, we mustn't starve; but he had the mortgage, and interest, at ten per cent was piling up. All we had, down to my cooking pans, was his——"

McBride stopped her. "I would not talk about it, mistress, and ye might claim some protection from the homestead laws."

"You are white," said the woman. "I'll work no more for Harmon. When I married Jock in Ontario, my skin was smooth, and I had pretty clothes. Now I'm wrinkled like my mother, and my hands are as rough as his. He's a good man, but when he doesn't get het up, thinking about our debts, he broods like an Indian. In British Columbia, a teamster gets two dollars a day, and I might hire for waitress at a sawmill boarding-house. Jock's sister is at Hastings, and she wrote for us to come along——"

Kevan gave his wife a frowning glance. McBride smiled.

"Yez need not state where yez are going. The useful

thing's to start. An' the moon will soon be shining to light yez on the road."

Kevan got up and began to load his remaining goods in the wagon. McBride signed Waring to help, and, in the circumstances, the young fellow thought he had, for a mounted policeman, got a rather unusual job. When all was on board, the woman climbed the wheel, and Kevan started his team. The police got on their horses, and for five or ten minutes rode beside the lurching rig. Harness rattled, wheels jarred, and the woman's indistinct figure swayed on the piled-up load. She claimed the battered household goods were hers, they were all of home that she had, and she would not let them go. Where a vague trail curved off from the other, Kevan looked up.

"So long, Mack. I reckon I always got a square deal from your patrols," he said in a meaning voice.

"Ye gave a square deal," said McBride. "Pass, friend. All's well!"

The team went faster; the man plodding by the near horse's head and the forlorn woman on the load melted in the dark. McBride followed the other trail.

"They are not the first to take the road, and more will start," he said. "Sober, industrious folk, broke by hail and frost and the gombeen man. It has nothing to do with us, but if I was at Ottawa, I'd stand up for keeping the best Canada has got."

"Oh, well," said Waring, "I myself would sooner be a mounted policeman than a politician. But what is *gombeen* man?"

"It's the name we have in Ireland for the fella' who used his money for a trap. Sometimes he keeps a village shop, and I've known wan keep a public, but if he's let carry out his schemes, all that's worth having round the

spot by and by is his. I would not say the type was Irish. Maybe his first home was in Jerusalem, a long time since, and ye'll find him in India. The queer thing is, he thrives best where nobody is rich."

"In Assiniboia, I expect Mr. Harmon is a pretty good example?"

"I would not say it. The police must not be libelous," McBride rejoined.

They pushed on. The night was warm, and sometimes they smelt wild peppermint under the horses' feet. Sometimes a smell of burning floated down the wind, and drifting smoke reflected a grass fire's orange glow. At length, they stopped by a little creek that curved about a wood, and Waring picketed his horses and gathered dry sticks for a fire. They had no tent, but their blankets were thick, and the pungent smoke banished the mosquitoes. McBride cooked supper and brewed green tea.

By and by Waring lighted his pipe. A mournful coyote saluted the rising moon; a horse stamped and the other pulled the rustling picket rope across the dry grass. Then all was quiet, and he began to muse. When one is young, to be healthily tired is some satisfaction, and he liked to feel the long day's ride was a good piece of work. His career was not the career his English relations had planned for him, and in all the circumstances his pals might think his joining the police a joke. It was not important. One perhaps must pay for one's extravagance, and he might have a worse occupation.

Then he frankly liked Mack. At the guardroom the old fellow was Sergeant McBride; when officers from Regina came along he used good Western English, and it looked as if the others weighed his remarks. On the trail he, in a sense, relaxed, but you did not forget your

rank and his. At any rate, old Mack carried a sort of easy dignity. For a sergeant and a private to patrol together was not the rule, but McBride took the line he liked, and had an object for all he did.

"When we stopped at his homestead I thought Kevan bothered," Waring remarked. "A good team and wagon are worth something. They and the stuff Mrs. Kevan carried off are perhaps his creditor's."

"An' what has it to do with us? The Royal North-West is not a debt-collecting agency. The law is for the protection of sober folk, and when ye interpret it ye use some sense. Very well. By the homestead rules, ye cannot seize a farmer's stock and household goods, unless ye have a mortgage for them; and then ye must sell by public auction, or give proper notice that ye will foreclose. If ye have not a mortgage, ye must prove the debt and ask for an order that he must pay."

"And in the meantime you must wait. I expect Kevan's creditor did not know he meant to quit."

"Now, perhaps, ye see why Mr. Harmon thought ye might give him useful news?"

"He knows nothing is doing," Waring rejoined. "Anyhow, he cannot logically claim he was cheated. Kevan cannot carry off the farm, and when he did get a crop Harmon took the lot; Kevan's wages were a few slabs of bacon and some second-class groceries. But if good farmers refuse to stay, why does the Ottawa Government encourage immigration?"

"In a country where yez pay your bills wance in twelve months, cash money's useful, and the exploitation of trustful strangers is a profitable industry. Men are more trustful than ye sometimes might think, and the useful sort is not afraid to run a risk. Then they're pushed out

from the land that bred them. In England, ye must not split a farm; the farm will keep the master and two or three men. It will not keep his children and theirs. In Ireland, at wan time, all the family took a share, and since there was no money, they divided the land. Soon ye had four families on a block that would not properly support wan, and but for them starving, ye might have had sixteen. Nature fixes the limit; potatoes feed a thicker crowd than wheat, but men cannot live on grass."

"At Belfast and Glasgow, I expect a large number get beef and beer. In London, some might not be satisfied without, for example, truffles and champagne."

"They live by thrassic. The farmer is the merchant's servant. In England yez can hire a plowman for eighteen shillings a week; in America, they sweat the farmers for the factory hands' reward. It was like that at the beginning, when Pharaoh fixed the price av wheat."

"But I don't yet see why the storekeeper is keen to seize farms that do not pay?"

"Yon fella' looks in front. Settlers are thrickling across the Territories; they will soon be flowing in like a stream. Indipindence calls some, they do not know all they are up against, and there is no room for them where they were born. And every wan who builds a homestead puts up the price av land. Where yez cannot reach an elevator, there is no use in growing wheat, and the best soil near the track on Government blocks is now preempted. Yez must buy the land on the railroad blocks and yez must pay for its convanience."

It looked logical, but Waring said:

"Much depends on the first lot's making good. D'you think they can?"

"Many a wan will go broke. They're poor folk and

if the first crop fails them, the farm is soon the gombene man's. It's capital they need, to spread the loss while they wait for their luck to turn. All years are not bad; the good and the bad go in circles—maybe cycles is the word. If I had three thousand dollars and had not age on me, in ten years I'd be rich. And the right sort will win through. Hail and frost cannot break the man who stands up to hard knocks and wants nothing but to work. Now let you look to the pickets, and I'll rest the fire."

Waring moved the horses to fresh grass and came back to his bed in the brush. In summer, for the most part, he slept under the stars, and sometimes in winter behind a bank of snow. The police's job was hard and might yet be harder. They were but a few squadrons scattered across the wilds, into which the stream of immigration had begun to flow. The strangers were the best and worst all Europe could send. None found the land of promise the paradise ticket-agents declared, and a cheated man's habit is to react dangerously.

Waring looked about. McBride, rolled in his blanket, was rather like a large mummy, but the moon touched the gold stripe on his projecting trouser leg. A stick snapped in the fire; and the smoke from the green stuff on top drifted away in a flowing curve, but soon all got indistinct, and Waring was asleep.

CHAPTER IV

ASHTON BURNS HIS WHEAT

MRS. THOMAS ASHTON occupied a broken rocking-chair in the shade by the homestead door. It was perhaps typical that she had not tried to mend the chair, and her print dress was stained by grease. At Liverpool, she was fastidious about her clothes; she had thought herself stylish, and sometimes a young blood told her she was beautiful, but since she helped at the art shop some dreary years had gone. Now her rather delicately modeled face was pinched, and she had got thin. Jane Ashton was city bred and lightly built, and the strain the frontierswomen bore was breaking her.

In the afternoon, the small log-house was very hot. The walls were not boarded; Ashton had *chinked* the logs with moss and clay. A square cook stove occupied the middle of the kitchen, and its pipe and a ladder went up to the bedroom in the roof. In winter, one must come down about three o'clock in the morning and fill up the stove. The greasy dinner plates were yet on the table, and clothes Jane had thought to mend littered an old couch. By and by she must cook Tom's supper, but he would not be back from Glencoyne for some time, and when he was not about one could go slack. Anyhow, she would sooner read than sew his old clothes, and the stained and battered *East Lynne* moved her to easy tears.

When the sun crept farther round the house and dazzling light touched the page she shut the book im-

patiently. She might move her chair, but Jane had come to hate the effort, and she looked about. On one side, the sod and birch-pole stable and a stack of wild hay cut her view. On the other side, a large breaker plow supported a wagon from which a wheel was gone. There was no garden and the small square house was drearily like others scattered about the plains.

In front, the prairie rolled gently back. The scorched grass was going white, and the oblong belt of wheat splashed the foreground with copper-red. Jane did not see the splendid color; she saw the heads along the crop's clean edge were somehow shrunk and limp. Until recently, the wheat had stood for two or three crowded days at Winnipeg, an American washing-machine, and some new clothes. Now it looked as if she must go on using a coal-oil can and go without the clothes. At Liverpool, her mother had an outhouse boiler and engaged a washer-woman.

Behind the wheat a lake shone in the sun, and where the water had shrunk back from the cracked mud salt dust sparkled. In summer red lilies touched with color the slope across the lake, and large wild strawberries dotted the banks. They were gone, and the grass was yellow, but farther back it melted to blue, and vague woods curved across the fading picture. Although the landscape was perhaps not beautiful, in the hot fall afternoon, it was marked by spacious charm. Mrs. Ashton did not note its tranquil gold and blue. She imagined the desolate plain went back to the Arctic Sea. And Liverpool, where buses ran and smart young clerks bantered you, was five thousand miles off.

Brooding drearily, she recaptured the week at the Isle of Man when Tom Ashton awkwardly courted her. The

holiday at Douglas was the first Tom had got, and it did not look as if he would get another. He was a large, brown-skinned young fellow, and for all his soberness, marked by a sort of vitality she had not noted in other young men she knew. Anyhow, she had allowed him to carry her off, and although they jarred, her love for her husband was not altogether gone.

Ashton's relations were dalesfolk. They did not like the marriage, and when she visited at the bleak farm in the Pennine hills, her cheap, fashionable clothes and Liverpool gentility did not help much. Tom's large, stern father studied her with a sort of scornful curiosity, as if he were puzzled; his wife stated they had hoped Tom would marry a fellside lass they knew who had money. Jane thought them hard and vulgar, and frankly hated both. Her people were not keen; they had hoped she might get a young bank clerk, who was, at all events, a gentleman.

Yet the Ashtons supplied the sum that carried Tom and his wife to Assiniboia and settled them on a hundred and sixty acres of Government land, where he labored like a dalesman from sunrise until dark. Moreover, like the dalesfolk, he was frugal, but Jane was extravagant. She felt their luck was bad. Her baby died; the doctor was fifty miles off and arrived too late, and she, perhaps, brooded when she ought to have got to work. Then the arctic cold daunted her, particularly after the blizzard when the team brought home the rig and she thought Tom dead. His best horse died, and when he was chopping trees for cordwood a poplar fell on him and broke two or three ribs. His crops were frozen, and now that another was gone, Jane, at length, rebelled.

She looked up. A rig two or three miles off cut the

sky. Tom would be back sooner than she had thought, and she went to the kitchen. Since she would not have time to fry potatoes, he must be satisfied with bread. As a rule, he did not grumble, but if he saw she had not yet cleaned the breakfast and dinner plates, he might be annoyed. His habit was not to leave chores undone.

After a time, Jane heard a snapping noise and she went to the door. A pillar of brown smoke went up from the wheat, and, opening at the top like a mushroom, spread across the sky. It looked as if the pillar revolved spirally, for it carried up sparks and half-burned stalks, and the flames at the bottom roared in a whirlwind. Then it broke, the smoke flowed away in long waves, and the fire leaped triumphantly across the wheat. Jane leaned against the doorpost for support. In an hour or two, the harvest for which her husband had begun to labor as soon as the frost left the ground would be altogether gone.

Ashton crossed the field and sat down, slackly, on the steps. He was tall and strongly built but his face was thin. Knitting his brows he looked straight in front. By and by Jane touched him, hesitatingly.

"Oh, Tom, you have burned the lot! Couldn't you have done something with the best of it?"

"There isn't any best," said Ashton. "All is bad, and nobody I know of is buying damaged wheat. If Winnipeg merchants would take the stuff, I reckon we would swamp the elevators."

The flames roared, and sparks and smoke went up in the rush of heated air. A fresh belt of wheat was gone, and the smoldering ash stretched farther back. Ashton moodily pictured his harnessing his team when the mornings were cold and soil that had not yet melted knocked

up the plow point. When the disc harrows tore the clods the afternoons were hot, and when at length the land-packer, jolting in the dust, rolled down the seed, the sweating horses could hardly pull their load. Summer was short, and if one hoped for the crop to ripen before the nights again got cold, man and team must labor as long as the light was in the sky. Ashton had done so, but his reward had melted in smoke.

"I can't believe it, Tom!" Jane broke out. "All couldn't be spoiled. You get savage; sometimes, you know, you do. I'd have waited for the thrashers."

"You would," said Ashton moodily. "So long as the wheat was there, you'd refuse to believe. At Liverpool your lot pretended, and I suppose a woman's habit is to cheat herself."

"Yours is to look for trouble, and rage before it comes. A gentleman doesn't swear; anyhow, he doesn't use the words Canadians use, and when he comes into the house he takes off his stable boots."

Ashton shrugged. "Oh, well, your mother warned you I wasn't a gentleman, and she hinted something of the sort to me. But we won't argue about it, and I want some food. However, I must go for the groceries I left in the rig."

When he came back, Jane noted with some surprise the load he carried. Ashton noted the stack of greasy plates in the wood-pulp bowl. His house was not a model house, and he himself could cook a better supper than he generally got. All the same, the afternoon was scorching, and sometimes he was sorry for Jane. They had had hard luck, but if she would front things squarely, and not blame him——

"You'd get dinner at the Murchison House?" she said.

"I did not. They charge you twenty-five cents, and I'd sooner go without dinner than tobacco."

"But you bought an extra lot of groceries."

"They are yours," said Ashton. "So long as I can get the stuff, we mustn't cut down your supplies, particularly since you have never had enough. All the same, you mustn't be extravagant."

He pushed back his chair. Jane was going to be hurt and he was sorry, but she must take the knock. He had tried to be kind; but for her relations' mean hostility he might have been kinder. Her father was a head clerk; Tom pictured his getting down from the twopenny bus, an old-fashioned silk hat on his head and an umbrella under his arm. He talked as if he were a company manager, and his ambitious wife was frankly ridiculous. Jane, of course, was a good sort, but she had inherited some qualities that jarred. Tom hated to pretend. His folk fronted the bleakest weather England knows, and stubbornly fought for all they got from the sour moorland soil; they were not at all ambitious to be third-class gentlefolk. However, there was no use in thinking about it. He, and Jane, must brace up.

"When I was at the settlement Harmon called me to his office," he said. "It looks as if we owed him more than we reckoned, and unless I gave him security, he threatened he'd stop supplies and claim his debt. Well, he had a mortgage deed for the farm ready, and I signed."

The color melted from Jane's face; her hand shook, and she put down her cup. She knew Harmon was a pitiless creditor.

"Oh, Tom! Now we have nothing. You burned the wheat, and the farm is gone!"

"It is ours for twelve months. That is something. If I pay ten per cent interest and a small installment, he will carry me on. If I get two or three good crops, I'll be free again."

Jane began to laugh a queer, jarring laugh.

"You are very hopeful! I expect nobody has yet got three good crops together, and nobody ever will. When you do get a crop, Harmon will take it and give us back just enough food and tools to keep us while we work for him. So long as you can pay the interest, you will be his slave; but when he wants he can turn us out."

Ashton loaded his pipe and broke two or three matches before he got a light. For once, Jane did not exaggerate. It looked as if he was beaten, and his wife must pay for his defeat. There was the worst trouble, but he had fought, and after all she had not helped much. Her ridiculous parents had persuaded her that labor was humiliating and their daughter must not soil her hands by the sort of work servants did. When Tom married, he resolved to show them he was stronger and better stuff than the ladylike Liverpool clerks; but all he had done was to lose his money, which the feeblest clerk could do.

"The security is good, and so long as Harmon gets the interest he will let us stay. I suppose our chance to get straight is not very large, but sometimes one's luck turns, and I'm willing to take a chance. I don't see another plan."

"What about going to Vancouver, or Spokane Falls? Kevan and one or two more went, and Drummond and his wife got a good job at an Oregon wheat farm. You are a better farmer than Drummond."

Ashton frowned. He would have liked to go, but for his wife's sake he dared not. Although he did not want

to be cruel, he had got a nasty knock, and since Jane's mother had taught her to despise the qualities that might have helped her help her husband, he must be frank.

"Mrs. Drummond and Mrs. Kevan are frontiers-women. If I was engaged at the Hastings mill or on the Vancouver wharf, you'd be forced to live in a Slabtown shack among the Chinks and Japs. I expect you'd hate it. Spokane is in America, in the belt where they grow the fine Walla wheat. I am a good plowman, and we might both get a post on a big dry-farm, but they're hustlers, and they'd keep you going from morning to night. At our small homestead, you sometimes grumble because you must cook for me. How'd you manage if you had to feed five or six hungry teamsters?"

"On a big farm they'd have a Chinese cook."

"If they had a Chink, they would not want you. There's no use pretending, Jane. You are not Mrs. Drummond's sort. You are afraid of horses, you hate mosquitoes, and when summer's hot you get tired and sick."

The blood leaped to Jane's colorless skin. "I'd hate to be Mrs. Drummond's sort; she's like a horse herself. You oughtn't to have married me. The girl at the farm near your father's was the girl for you. She's as big, and awkward, as a Liverpool policeman."

Ashton smiled. Although she had useful qualities, Alice Raine was not remarkably graceful.

"The Liverpool police are a fine lot. You get them from the North, where men are proper men; but there's no use in being nasty. Let's try to be sensible."

For a moment or two Jane was quiet. She wanted Tom to be sensible. After all, he was a good husband, and he tried to think for her; but the plains were horribly lonely, and she shrank from the dreary labor and arctic

cold. At Liverpool all had gone smoothly, and she had had pretty clothes. Jane was city bred, and the crowded streets called.

"Couldn't we go home?" she asked in a hesitating voice.

"I think not," said Ashton, grimly. "When I took my portion, I knew it was all I would get. It's gone, and in England a plowman's pay is eighteen shillings a week——" He stopped for a moment, and resumed with a moody smile: "I might perhaps enlist for a policeman, but when I put on the uniform, your mother would be done with you. There's another thing; you can buy a cheap emigrant ticket for Canada, but if you want to go back, you must pay the usual fare. I can't ask my folk for money, and I doubt if yours would put up a good sum in order to bring me home."

Jane's look got harder. She felt Tom did not take the proper line, and she perhaps did not; but both had got a cruel knock.

"You hate them, because they did not think you good enough," she said. "Somehow we might get the money; your pride's the obstacle. You won't go home and admit you're broke."

"No, by George!" said Ashton. "I will not ask your relations to support my wife. My pride is all that's left."

"Very well, Tom," said Jane with a touch of dignity. "I expect you married the wrong girl, but to quarrel about it will carry us nowhere. Although perhaps I am slack and soon get tired, I'm willing to work for you; I will not stop and be Harmon's slave. That's all I know. By and by I might see a plan."

She carried off the plates, and Ashton went to the stable. Although Jane had forced him to hurt her and the farm was no longer his, the chores must be done, and

when he had fed his horses he must mend the bridge at the creek. He got back as dark fell, but Jane had gone to bed, and so far as he could distinguish she was asleep. Ashton lighted his pipe and for a time brooded by the stove.

Jane was a slender little thing, and his business was to carry her load. He reckoned he had tried, but sometimes she was obstinate. Anyhow, he would not go back broke, and she could not roam the Pacific slope with him while he looked for work. No, for her sake, he must labor for Harmon and trust his luck.

In the morning Jane gave him breakfast, and he thought the food better than usual. For the most part, she was quiet, but she put him up a good lunch, and when he got on board his wagon he saw her at the door. Ashton waved, and started for a bluff three miles off.

He was occupied all day, cutting poles to mend his stable roof and sawing birch trunks he had some time since chopped for cordwood. When he got back in the evening Jane was not about, but his supper was on the cold stove and he saw a note. Ashton tore the envelope and his mouth went tight.

"I am afraid I'd never be useful on a farm, and I haven't helped you as I would have liked," Jane wrote. "It is not my fault I'm not as strong and hardy as a frontierswoman. For all that, I have some talents you don't know, and I dare say I shall get a post at a store. There is no use in your trying to find me, because I would not come back. I'm sorry, Tom, but I must go. Good-by, and good luck."

Ashton clenched his fist. Little Jane was gone and he knew himself forlorn. The first train he could get did not start for twenty-four hours, and although he imagined she would steer for Winnipeg, he did not know. The

city was not large, but sometimes Jane was firm. He must try to find out where she was, and wait. After all, she was staunch, and when she had shown him she could be independent he might persuade her to come back. But he was not going to run after her when both were angry.

He got his supper. His appetite was not keen, and when he threw the plates in the wood-pulp bowl he swore. Now he thought about it, Harmon had really banished Jane, and if she got hurt, the greedy swine should pay.

CHAPTER V

HOPE STANDS FAST

ALL the wheat in the Glencoyne district was not hurt. But three nights were cold, and the frost, as its habit is, blighted one crop and spared another with a sort of freakish cruelty. As a rule, wheat on low ground, where the damp first touches the ripening ears, was damaged worst, but some grain on high belts shriveled, and one could not calculate. All one could do was to plow as soon as the thawing soil would slide along the moldboard. Since land was cheap and might, in fact, be got for nothing, when one did get two or three crops farming paid; but at the beginning, the lean years, for the most part, ate up the produce of the good.

Adam Hope, driving home from the settlement one evening, thoughtfully looked about. Hope was a rather lightly built Montreal Canadian, and, for all his youth, his habit was thoughtful. As a rule, he talked with queer, sober frankness, and sometimes strangers thought him an unconscious humorist. He had no coat, and his old blue shirt and overall trousers closely followed the lines of his thin but athletic figure. When the wagon jolted, he swayed by long practice easily on the spring seat. The team knew they steered for the stable, and Hope let them go. Their proper business was to haul the plow, but the lightness they had inherited from the native bronco stock helped their speed, although they had perhaps derived their strength from the Suffolk punch.

The rushing winds and summer thunderstorms were

gone. After three cold nights, the frost had vanished and the plains rested in the sunshine that marks the tranquil fall. The grass had lost its freshness and was going yellow; the curving trail crossed a dark belt where a fire had passed. Hope saw scattered woods melt to blue in the evening light, a shining lake, and a small square homestead. In front was a yellow oblong, crossed by rows of coppery-red stooks. At one spot farther back a slanted smoke plume went up from a tossing cloud of dust, and Hope heard a measured throb. Nesbit had saved his harvest, and Dillon was thrashing. In the Northwest fall is dry, and one thrashes one's wheat in the field where it grew. Hope knitted his brows and he pondered.

By and by a fresh smoke plume went up explosively from a sinuous belt of trees. The trees marked a curving prairie ravine, and Hope steadied his horses down the bank. Tangled poplars and bushes cut his view, but a high-pressure engine's snorts got louder, and he heard shouts and rolling wheels. At the bottom of the ravine he steered cautiously across a log bridge that had obviously not long since carried an awkward load, and when he was half-way up the slope on the other side he stopped and firmly held his nervous team.

Smoke and red cinders spouted from a thrashing engine's stack. She burned wood, and an overload of steam blew noisily from the valves. Two greasy, sweating men pushed brush and branches under the big driving-wheels. The wheels revolved savagely, but the machine did not advance, and Hope thought she might have run backwards, but the separator mill she hauled was jammed against a tree. A man by the wheels got up, swore without passion, as a plainsman swears, and signaled the

driver. The snorting stopped, but the valves got noisier. Hope's horses plunged, and before he forced them to stand a few minutes went.

"Do you reckon to get her up?" he asked.

"If she doesn't bust, she's going up," the engineer replied. "Simpson is waiting for us, and we aim to keep ahead of the Willis gang."

"Looks as if you would stop in front," Hope remarked. "I doubt if Willis's outfit could climb over you. However, when you are through at Simpson's, you might thrash for me."

"We can't do it at bushel rate. With a crop like yours, we have to beat up a lot of chaff to get our measure."

"There's the trouble," Hope agreed. "I can't pay you more than I'm likely to get at the elevators, but I think the stooks at the middle of the field will thrash out the proper weight. Won't you take a chance and fix a price?"

The thrasher cogitated. He knew something about frozen wheat, and he had studied Hope's harvest field. He could not afford to be generous, but he was willing to help. For all his polite talk, the thin young man had gall, and he could handle a nervous team. The horses were scared by the roaring valves, but since the engine blocked the trail he had forced them up the bank. He did not watch them; his eyes were fixed on the man to whom he talked. His firm hands felt the animals' varying mood, and they knew their master.

"If I fix a rate, I must fix her high. We'll take the job on time pay, but we'll give you a square deal. I guess you might risk it and get your money back."

Hope knew the fellow honest, and he nodded.

"Very well. When you are through at Simpson's you might come along."

Bracing his feet against the wagon front, he steered the horses back into the trail. Steam blew across them, and for a moment it looked as if the wagon were going down the bank. Then Hope got control, and a man signaled the engineer.

"You can let her go, Mike."

The valves were suddenly quiet and the crash of wheels in smashing wood drowned the engine's snorts. Then the snorts triumphed, and a fresh clank and rumble marked the separator's advance. Hope's horses had had enough, and he swung about on the driving seat as they leaped uphill.

Twenty minutes afterwards he put the team in the stable and carried the parcels he had brought from the settlement to his homestead. The house, like Ashton's, was small and built of thin birch logs, but a veranda went in front and the kitchen was matchboarded. At the back, a door opened to a lean-to shed in which cordwood might be stored, and two very small bedrooms occupied the roof. So far the house was very much the sort of house pioneer farmers built, but a curtained bookcase, one or two articles of good furniture, and two or three pictures struck an exotic note. Although the kitchen was homelike, one sensed a cultivated woman's touch.

Mrs. Hope looked up from the stove. She herself had sewn her cotton summer clothes, but all Martha Hope did was competently done, and her light figure was modeled in graceful lines. Summer heat and the stove in winter had dried her skin, and when one studied her,

one noted marks of strain, but her charm had not gone, and courage and humor were in her steady eyes.

"You must wait for five minutes, Adam, and in the meantime you can give me the news," she said. "You might begin with the items that do not matter. We will talk about important things when you have got some food."

Hope stretched his legs in a canvas chair.

"Very well. I expect it matters to Ashton, but his wife has quit. On the day after he burned his wheat, she took the cars for Winnipeg. I believe that's all he knows."

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Hope. "I thought she might go. All summer one could see the strain get worse, though Ashton, no doubt, did not. Jane Ashton is not the stuff for the Northwest. I think, from the beginning, she was afraid of the plains."

"Sometimes the country's daunting," Hope remarked. "When the thermometer drops and drops, to go ahead as usual implies some nerve. Then to hear a blizzard spring up in the dark and feel the house rock is not soothing for a tenderfoot. All the same, you have fronted it."

"I am Canadian, Adam."

"You are thoroughbred. Seems to me people of two sorts make good; folk who spring from strong peasant stock, and the thoroughbred. The first lot never had much, and the others are willing to go without. Ashton's a North-of-England farmer, and you can spot the hard sand in him; his wife properly belongs to the small city streets, where their ambition is to be—I think their word's genteel. All the same, I liked Mrs. Ashton, and I think

her luck here was bad; but I do not see where we can help, particularly since she's gone."

Mrs. Hope gave her husband an indulgent smile. "Sometimes you argue like a lawyer. In a way, perhaps, Harmon had something to do with Mrs. Ashton's going."

"I guess that is so," Hope agreed. "A settlement store is the poor man's bank, and but for the storekeeper the farmers could not carry on. He runs some risk and is justified to charge a good interest on the bills we do not meet. All the same, Harmon puzzles me. Looks as if his main object was not to trade with us, but to take our farms. Although he's got two or three, I imagine he wants some more——"


For a moment or two he pondered, and then, knitting his brows, resumed: "The thing is queer. The fellows who mortgaged their land did so because their farming did not pay, and in the circumstances you might argue that Harmon could not pay a manager. The taxes force him to use the block, for the Government, very properly, does not encourage speculators to hold up land."

"Harmon does not pay a manager. He allows his debtors to work for him."

"He must supply them with food and tools and clothes, which is all the most part of us can hope for. Then the mortgage stands for a useful sum. The fellow is locking up capital. Where does he get it?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Hope. "He came to Glen-coyne from a little store in the backwoods, where he could not have got rich."

Hope's habit was to be as accurate as possible, and he pondered his reply. The phrase big business was not yet coined, but the methods for which it stands were used in



Canada when Frontenac tried to put down the free-trade fur coureurs.

"Sometimes I think Montreal speculators are behind the fellow's plans. One might reckon us not worth exploiting, but nobody, perhaps, is so poor that he can't be robbed. Anyhow, Harmon is a dangerous tool, and if I used him, I'd wear horsehide gloves."

"Supper is ready," Mrs. Hope remarked.

Hope fetched a chair for her, and until he had satisfied his appetite he did not talk. At Montreal, he might have thought bacon, fried potatoes and flap-jacks for every day in the week monotonous; but in the Northwest one ate in order that one might work. After supper Mrs. Hope said quietly:

"Now you might give me all the news."

"When I was at the store, Harmon told me that since I'd lost my crop my credit was bad. He wanted cash, but if I hadn't got some, he'd take a mortgage on my farm."

Mrs. Hope looked up. Her disturbed glance searched her husband's face, and she was comforted. Adam's look was quiet, but she knew he would fight.

"I'd got a sort of hint before, and my wallet was in my pocket," he resumed. "I gave the fellow two hundred dollars and told him he might go to hell."

"Calmly and dispassionately, just like that?" said Mrs. Hope.

"Why, of course. When you talk to Harmon's sort you mustn't let yourself get mad."

Mrs. Hope laughed, but her keenest emotion was relief.

"Now I understand all Jane Ashton felt when she knew the farm was no longer theirs. By contrast with your uncle's house at Montreal, our homestead is a shack, but it's ours, and it is home. A house is important to a

woman, and we must hold on. But two hundred dollars would not pay all our debt."

"That is so," said Hope. "So long as the stuff is not mortgaged, Harmon cannot seize my implements and teams. All the same, he must be paid, and when the wheat is thrashed I'll try to meet the bill."

"Then, you are going to thrash? You doubted if the crop would bear the cost."

"The thrasher is hopeful, and he'll wait until the wheat is at the elevators. Anyhow, something must be risked, and we took a plunge before."

He loaded his pipe and stooped to get a light at the stove. Mrs. Hope noted his frugality, and somehow was moved. When she first knew Adam at Toronto, where he had a post at a merchant house, he was not parsimonious. In a month he stated that he was starting west and soberly asked her to marry him. Martha remembered that she laughed when she agreed, and her Ontario Scots relations thought her *fey*. Adam's uncle, the head of the Hope merchant house, declared frankly that he had done with the damfool.

"We will hold on," she said. "I don't know if we are a strong combine, but we are a combine."

"That is so," Hope agreed. "My grandfather was a chopper, and for all Uncle Amos's ambitions, I guess he could, when he hasn't got dyspepsia, yet use an axe. Canada wasn't bought by money, but muscle. The pioneers' sons built the cities, and sometimes their sons go back. A queer cycle, but I suppose our inheritance is to strain and sweat."

Mrs. Hope thought it Adam's; his was not the type that takes the easy road. She knew him rather competent than clever, and her city friends thought him dull, but in a

month he had persuaded her to start uphill with him. Well, she was young, and in the city romance and adventure called. Now the romance had vanished, and they carried an awkward load, but so long as Adam pushed forward she would not turn back.

"Let's be practical," she said. "Suppose the sum you get for the damaged wheat but pays for the thrashing? Before you harvest a fresh crop twelve months must go."

"And the crop might be frozen? Well, I might acknowledge we were beaten and ask Uncle Amos for a small clerk's post, but since I turned down the post he gave me and he's harder than rock elm, he might refuse."

"It's unthinkable," Mrs. Hope agreed. "So long as we have cordwood and potatoes, we are not beaten. The potatoes must soon be dug and stored in the house; and somehow we must get flour and pork—I'd hate to let you go, but the horses are good, and in winter you might engage for a teamster at a lumber camp in the Manitoba woods. In fact, we'll keep the flag flying; but in the circumstances, I hope Ruth Allen does not look us up."

"Your English pal? Well, if you feed her salt pork and potatoes, breakfast, dinner, and supper, she mightn't stop for long."

Mrs. Hope knitted her brows. Adam was not parsimonious, and hospitality was a tradition of the pioneers. All the same, she could not indulge her guest.

"Ruth is thoroughbred, and you admitted that thoroughbred people are willing to go without. When I was in England and rather lonely, she was kind——"

"You were across for nearly two years, I think?"

"Yes, Adam," said Mrs. Hope with a smile. "You see, I didn't know whether I could be a famous artist, but I thought it possible, and at London and Paris I might find

out—I did find out that my talents were not remarkable, and the sum I squandered would be useful now.”

Hope frowned. Martha had some talent she might have cultivated, but the time was gone, and she must help him fight for food and clothes.

“The thing that hurts the worst is to feel I let you down,” he said.

“But you mustn’t. When I chose the hard road I knew where I went. I might have been a second-class drawing mistress, but that, I think, is all, and so long as we can keep the homestead I’ll be happy. But Ruth was a useful pal, I talked much about Canada, and after the crash, when her father died, she wrote——Well, I’d rather boasted about the plains; one does boast, you know. Besides, you were hopeful, and I wanted a friend. Ruth got a post in England, but her employer died, and she stated she was starting for Winnipeg. In a way, I feel I’m accountable.”

Hope nodded. A good Canadian’s habit is to boost the part of Canada in which he resides.

“She might hit a job at Winnipeg, but when harvest’s poor not much is doing. Anyhow, so far as it’s possible, we must see her out.”

“You are a very good sort,” Mrs. Hope remarked. “Now I think we will clean the plates.”

CHAPTER VI

LATIMER'S PASSENGER

ABELL tolled, soft-coal smoke streamed back across the dusty cars, and the Vancouver express noisily started west. Bob Latimer, standing upright, his body braced, controlled his plunging team, although the wagon rocked and the wheels jarred on the side-track rails. He had stopped for the night at the hotel, and the horses were fresh and keen to take the road for home.

When the train was gone, he looked about the station yard. There was no platform, and the agent's ship-lap office fronted the main track. On the other side, a grain elevator lifted its ugly bulk above a row of small frame houses. Steam blew about its top, wheels rumbled behind the iron walls, and a railroad man stuck tickets on the cars at its foot. The wheat that had escaped the frost was going east, and Latimer knew himself lucky because some of his was on board.

He ought to have started for his farm at daybreak, but he had waited until noon for some goods, which he imagined were in the heap thrown out from the baggage car. Only one passenger had got down and was talking to the hotel-keeper, who picked up two or three articles and went off across the line. The girl to whom he had spoken looked about irresolutely, as if she did not know where to go; but the agent signaled, and Bob jumped down and tied his horses.

"Your stuff's come through," said the agent. "You might O.K. the shipping bill."

"I'll first go see how much the baggage men have smashed. But who is the lady?"

"She's going to Glencoyne," the agent replied. "That's all I know."

Bob found his packages and glanced at the girl. She was young, and rather small and slender. Her clothes were good, but he thought they began to be shabby, and her look was preoccupied; in fact, he imagined her disturbed. Waiting by her battered trunk, she was somehow forlorn.

"You are for Glencoyne?" he said. "Have you friends who will send for you?"

The girl hesitated, and her glance searched his face. She saw a thin, athletic young fellow; she knew he was athletic because she had noted his jump from the wagon, and his light, balanced step. But for his old, soil-stained clothes, his type was much the type she had known in England before her father died and the Allens' fortunes crashed.

"I know Mrs. Hope," she said. "She, however, does not expect me, and the man whom I asked said the settlement is thirty miles off. I suppose I must hire a rig——"

She stopped with a touch of embarrassment. One must not inform a stranger that one's money was gone. Martha, of course, would pay the man, but the sum was rather large, and she imagined the Hopes were not rich. Bob guessed where the trouble was; as a rule, he himself was broke.

"I am going to Glencoyne and have room for a passenger," he said. "If you'd sooner, I could let Hope know you had arrived, and he must send for you in the morning. The drawback is, I expect they'll have a pretty full house at the hotel. However, you saw the landlord——"

"He told me three or four teamsters were stopping for the night, but he would inquire if somebody would give me a room."

At Walpole spare rooms were not numerous, and Bob doubted if the girl would like her lodging. He imagined her fastidious; anyhow, her look was tired and rather daunted.

"The best plan is for you to get on board my rig," he said. "I ought, perhaps, to state I'm Bob Latimer, and Adam Hope's pal. If you agree, we'll load up your trunk and start."

"You are kind. I am Ruth Allen. Perhaps I ought not to bother you, but to wait for the morning would be dreary."

Bob went for his horses, and when he put her trunk on board Ruth noted his smooth and easy swing. Her clothes were not numerous, but to move the trunk at Winnipeg had bothered her. Throwing two or three wheat sacks on the cross seat, he ordered her to sit tight, and let the horses go.

The light wagon lurched across the rails and rocked along the streets where the black soil was torn in holes. Dust tossed about the horses' hammering feet, wheels jarred, and harness rattled. The little wooden houses and high plank sidewalk rolled by; and then, but for one or two homesteads, all Ruth saw was shining grass. The windmill pumps and brick farmhouses were not yet, and when the small board shacks sank behind gently rising ground it looked as if the brown trail curved back across a wilderness. Gophers, like squirrels, fled from the jarring wheels, and sometimes a prairie hen's fluttering brood sought fresh cover. Latimer indicated a hole a badger

had dug, and at one or two spots bleached white objects shone in the grass.

"Buffalo bones," he said. "Three or four years since they were plentiful, but I believe a Chicago junk merchant collected the stuff for fertilizer. If he collected gophers, he might have my lot. Canada advances, because when those buffalo were alive the Indians and the Metis ruled the plains. Now we're here. The railroad dumped us, and there might be some grounds for the white man's claim that we are a more useful race. Canada's motto is Progress; you must get on a move. To feel you are going ahead is bracing, but I suppose something depends on where you steer. However, the wind gets cool. Let me pull my skin coat across your knees."

He reached down for the coat, and Ruth, for politeness' sake, did not refuse, although she would sooner have gone without. The hair had begun to peel from the greasy skin, and she imagined one destroyed living animal which looked like that. Latimer perhaps noted her hesitation, for he laughed.

"One sticks to an old and useful friend. Then, you see, the pioneers' uniform is the sort of stuff for which fashionable people have no more use, and, as a rule, the station end of Main Street, Winnipeg, is our supply depôt. Perhaps you know the spot?"

Ruth gave him a swift glance, and wondered whether his frankness was meant to challenge hers. The C.P.R. marble-floored station was not yet built, and one got down on the level track in a dark and sooty wooden cave. At one side were clapboard sheds like cattle byres, where immigrants, for a limited time, might claim free lodging. In front, mean shacks, occupied by Jewish dealers in second-hand clothes, bordered the plank sidewalk.

"For four or five days I was at the immigrant sheds," she said in a quiet voice. "One's uniform is not important, but I suppose one must pay for being a pioneer."

"That is so. It looks as if we are a sort of forlorn hope, and when the regular battalions arrive they'll roll ahead across our bodies."

Ruth pondered. He stressed the farmers' poverty, and she wondered whether he had an object. At Winnipeg she had got something of a shock. She had thought to find a prosperous city, where all could get a post, but Winnipeg's prosperity was not conspicuous.

"I believe a large quantity of wheat was frozen," she said. "However, when the supply is short, does not the price go up?"

"Quite sound," said Bob, smiling. "The drawback is, Liverpool corn merchants fix the price, and they get wheat from Oregon, California, Argentina, and India, where frost does not cut the crop. Then our stuff must go fifteen hundred miles to Montreal by rail and Lake boat, and from our selfish point of view the world's wheat is too cheap. However, if we did get a first-class harvest, when the other lot did not, I think we might, at all events, pay off our mortgages."

"You are not an optimist."

"I'm a farmer," said Bob. "All the same, the Northwest is a bully country, and one looks in front. So long as you keep on going, your luck may turn."

"I hope you are a true prophet," Ruth remarked.

Her thoughtful glance searched the plain. The landscape was not beautiful, but in the tranquil Indian summer, the lonely sweep of grass, rolling back to the vague blue woods on the horizon, was marked by restful calm. Pale sunshine touched the flats with gold, a lake sparkled,

and the thin white clouds were high. For some time her luck had certainly not been good, and now England was four thousand five hundred miles off, she must be resigned to stop. When one's capital was two or three dollars, one could not push far ahead.

By and by, where the trail passed a pile of turf from which a stove-pipe projected, she saw two women at work in a hole. One, whose head was level with the ground, swung a pick; another, perhaps supported by a plank, tilted a bucket from which dark soil ran. Ruth noted their muscular bodies and dull, lined faces; when Latimer smiled and waved his hand they stopped for a moment and one's brooding glance followed the rig. Ruth shrank from the picture.

"Who are they?" she asked. "What are they doing?"

"Russians of a sort," said Bob. "They are digging a well; you must go down for water, and then sometimes it's alkaline. I don't know if they are typical examples, and perhaps they're sectarian cranks who got up against the Orthodox church; but the men are prophets and the women cultivate the fields. At the beginning, the women pulled the harrows, and in summer the prophets had no use for clothes. In fact I believe my pal, McBride, was bothered to persuade them Assiniboia is not a Russian mystic's paradise."

Ruth fixed her eyes in front. If she looked back, she feared the women might haunt her dreams. They were white, and entitled to some happiness and freedom; but she hated to think a slave might wear their dull, hopeless look. In the meantime, a bluff in front got higher, and by and by Latimer stopped his horses and helped her down.

"The water in the creek is good. I'll brew some tea," he said.

On the bluff's south side the sun was warm, and when Bob threw the wheat bags at the bottom of a tree Ruth was satisfied to rest. The birch leaves shone like pale gold, and a white cloud floated in the tranquil sky. Since she dared not squander money for a berth, she had not slept on board the rocking second-class car, and when the train stopped at a station where breakfast was served she walked about by the wheels.

Bob built a fire, and sometimes gave his companion an interested glance. He thought he knew her type; at all events he had at one time met girls like that in London, and at an English country house. She was rather attractive; delicately pretty was perhaps the word. Yet her face was thin, and when one studied her, her look was tired. She had, no doubt, not found Canada all that Provincial governments and steamship agencies declared. Taking a blackened can from the fire, he gave her the deep, handled lid, and pulled out cheese and crackers. The smell of green tea pierced the wood-smoke, and Ruth drained the tin cup, but when she broke a cracker Bob thought she used some control. The girl was frankly hungry, but would sooner he did not know. His business was to indulge her, and he was, perhaps, a tactful host, for the tea and crackers vanished, and when all were gone Ruth gave him a smile.

"I must thank you for my lunch, and you, perhaps, were kinder than you thought. When I got down from the cars, I was forlorn and dreary. Now I'm braced and fresh."

"That's something," Bob remarked. "We are queer stuff, and on the plains you soon find out that your pluck and confidence depend on your getting a proper supply of food. I don't mention drink; in the Territories, liquor

can't be got. In a way, the thing's humiliating. Looks as if our emotions were, so to speak, pathological. Anyhow, the word is nicer than one I thought about."

Ruth approved his humorous talk. The food and tea had braced her, and behind the trees the sun was warm. Thin, blue wood-smoke floated about the camp; the horses fed quietly in the dry grass.

"I think I shall like the prairie better than Winnipeg," she remarked.

"Its drawbacks and advantages are rather mixed," said Bob. "The proper line is to strike a balance, but you must choose your time. When you sit by the stove after supper the beam is pretty level; before breakfast on a bitter morning the drawback end crashes down. However, when I philosophize my pals get bored. Do you imply that you might stop with Mrs. Hope?"

"If my help was useful. I was two or three weeks at Winnipeg, but nobody would engage me, and I began to be afraid. I did not write to Martha. One likes to be independent, and I thought I would sooner tell her I had got a post. Besides, when I inquired, she was rather enthusiastic about the Northwest."

Bob imagined Mrs. Hope's reply was sent before the frost cut Adam's crop, and he pictured the jolts the girl had, no doubt, got. The immigration officers' main business was to find the frontier settlers wives, and to some extent the selection was public and frank. He did not think Miss Allen had emigrated in order to search for a husband; but in Canada, as in England, young women did not yet engage in business, and if she had talents, he reckoned they were not the practically useful sort. Yet she had fronted the rash adventure, and he liked her pluck.

"Oh, well," he said, "our habit is to talk like Mrs.

Hope. I expect we feel we mustn't let down our country, and when relations at home inquire, we state it's the finest in the world. Sometimes one looks us up; and then we argue like the fox who lost his tail: the things we haven't got are the sort of things nobody ought to have. After all, the argument is sounder than it looks. The things you really do not need are pretty numerous."

Ruth smiled, a thoughtful smile. "I don't know if you are altogether helpful. Anyhow, I am in Canada and I cannot go back."


"One goes ahead," said Bob. "As a rule, on the plains, somebody is willing to help one along. We are not remarkably polite, but on the whole, we're stanch. However, I must sew up a headstall strap, and I'll call when it's time to start."

He went off, and Ruth saw him pull some harness over a horse's head. The rather dusty wheat bags were soft, and a poplar trunk comfortably supported her back. On the cars she had not slept and the night was long and cold. By and by the plain got indistinct, and melted.

Latimer touched her gently, and when she jumped up the blood flushed her skin.

"Oh," she said, "I thought I was back at the horrible immigration sheds."

Bob smiled and helped her into the wagon.



CHAPTER VII

A CAVE-MAN'S HOSPITALITY

LATIMER'S horses were not fast; their business was to haul a load, and he had, for Ruth's sake, waited by the bluff longer than she thought. When the sun got low nothing indicated that she was near the Glencoyne settlement, and only a little pointed hill broke the lonely flats. Ruth felt the afternoon get colder, but some quality in the virgin freshness braced her like wine. Bob steered for the hill. Trees dotted its south slope, and Ruth thought its height sixty or seventy feet but it was exotic on the level grass.

"The Butte; in the native tongue, *bute*," he said. "Since I'm not a geologist, I don't know how it got there, but some more are scattered about the prairie, and Pilot Butte is their usual name. My house is at the bottom, and we'll arrive in ten minutes."

"But I am going to Mrs. Hope's," said Ruth.

"Certainly, Miss Allen. I expect she will approve your allowing me to carry you there, but Adam's homestead is five or six miles off, the horses yesterday hauled a load of wheat to the railroad, and I'd like to dump the stuff I brought from the station. In the meantime, I can give you supper."

The statements were plausible, and Ruth hoped her disturbance had not been obvious. Latimer had answered soberly, but she sensed a touch of freakish humor. The trail curved about the butte, and she saw an oblong of tall stubble, and a large yellow mound that looked like straw

and chaff. Bob said the pyramid was his wheat bin; one stacked the grain bags in the field and allowed the straw that fell from the thrashing mill elevator to bury the pile. He invited Ruth to find his house, and laughed when she was baffled.

"One ought to see a house two or three miles off, and since you cannot, you doubt if there is one. I suppose you are logical; but you might look again. Perhaps you have studied the puzzle pictures in the magazines."

Woodcuts in which the white spaces were portraits amused the late-Victorians, and since the homestead was certainly not on the plain, Ruth fixed her eyes on the butte. Where the trees stopped near the bottom a straight object that was not a birch trunk projected from the slope, and then a window shone in the sun.

"Oh," she said, "the house is under the hill!"

"Sawed lumber is expensive, and to find long, straight logs is rather hard," said Bob. "Bellinda and I are troglodytes for economy; but I expect in ancient times the cave-man's plan had some advantages. When the dinosaurs and so forth went hunting, they were no doubt baffled to find out where he lived. Since the homestead is in the land-book, we can't cheat the tax collector."

Ruth had not thought him married; somehow one knew a bachelor, and although she had not much grounds to be interested, she speculated about his wife. In a few minutes he stopped the horses, and, helping her down, pushed back a door. Coming in from the sunshine, all Ruth at first saw was a large rusty stove, by which Latimer knelt. When flames twinkled behind the register, he got up.

"I must loose the team. In about ten minutes I'll be back."

He vanished, and Ruth, seeing a cracked looking-glass,

put straight her hair and hat. The sun and the fresh afternoon had brought a touch of color to her skin, but she wondered whether the delicate pink and white that was not long since her greatest charm was not gone for good. In twelve months, she had lost father and mother and fronted the world alone. It looked as if her relations to some extent made her accountable for her father's crash, and her lover had, not very gracefully, retired. Since pride was all that was left her, she refused their help, and found that to let Frank go hurt less than she had thought. But she dared not dwell upon it; all that was past was done with, and in Canada her luck might turn.

Latimer's dug-out interested her, but she thought it rather like a doll's house than a cave. In fact, it was the sort of place in which one might play at keeping house. The floor was wood, and pictures of large cattle, and agricultural machinery makers' almanacs, ornamented the matchboarded walls. Two double windows lighted the little room, but she certainly had not thought to see a battered rosewood piano in a corner. Then the guns in a glass-fronted case were London guns. Ruth remarked their fine modeling and beautiful Damascus barrels; her father had had a pair like that. By contrast, the Marlin rifle was rudely workmanlike.

A door opened to another room, and since it looked as if Latimer was occupied, she crossed the floor. She saw two wooden bunks against the walls, some long boots and a man's old clothes, stained by soil. The smell of peppermint in the hay-stuffed bedding was faintly sweet. Ruth fastened the door. Nothing indicated a woman's touch, but somehow the queer little house was friendly.

When Latimer came back he moved a square of match-

boarding, and indicated that the cave went a few yards farther into the hill.

"Our larder and woodshed," he remarked. "When the thermometer is forty below and a wind is blowing, one hates to go out and chop; but I must think about the bill-of-fare. Can you scramble eggs?"

"I'm sorry I cannot," Ruth replied in an apologetic voice.

"A Canadian cook never admits he cannot cook; he allows you to find out," Bob remarked. "Well, I will not risk it, but since eggs are nearly all we've got, I'll try an omelette. Sometimes my luck is good."

He sliced some boiled potatoes and bacon in a frying-pan, and presently poured the eggs he broke on to the hissing stuff.

"*Au sauvage*, unless the gender's feminine," he said. "As a rule, it's better than it looks, but something depends on your appetite."

Ruth agreed. During her last week at Winnipeg she had been sternly frugal, and her appetite was keen. By and by Bob beat up flour and water, and seized the frying-pan.

"Unless you are extravagant, you do not use eggs for the next course, and if you have got the proper touch, you don't need yeast powder. You beat the mixture until it froths, throw it in the spider, and then at the roof. For example——"

He jerked his arm, and a thin flat cake shot up, turned in the air, and splashed back into the pan. Bob rubbed some grease from his face and tossed two or three more cakes.

"A beginner might use a fork, but a flapjack ought to

flap," he said. "Now we add some drips, and dessert is served."

Seizing a buckhorn-handled fork, he stabbed two cans, on one of which the label pictured a large white flower.

"The fork was forged in Sheffield; the Canadian nick-eled sort doubles up. You mustn't cut the can. Drips and condensed milk are insidious stuff and hate to be kept in."

"But why do you use condensed milk?" Ruth inquired.

"In the agricultural Territories, all milk and meat is canned, and you cannot get butter unless you are rich. There is, so to speak, a reason; but if I talked about farming, you might get bored."

He brewed green tea. Ruth noted its fragrance, and the smell of the resinous matchboards which the stove had warmed. She thought the flapjacks good, and she admitted Latimer was a first-class host. Then for all his careless talk, one sensed a sort of competence.

"You have some hens?" she said.

"In Canada, they're chickens, as long as they live," said Bob. "Bellinda started the flock, but I carry on because they're pals and when I'm dull they come in and talk to me. A chicken's friendlier than you might think, and if you can talk in the proper voice, she answers you. And when she's happy, she likes you to know. As a rule in winter, the lot camp in the woodshed."

"In your larder?" Ruth remarked.

Bob laughed, and putting the plates in a bucket, fetched her a skin chair.

"It's the best we have got. Bellinda shot the antelopes and sewed the hides."

After the jolting wagon Ruth was willing to go slack, and the skins molded themselves to her tired body. The little room was warm, but she must not go to sleep, and

she rather languidly looked about. She faced a window, and in the west the sky was going green and red. She sensed a wide and soothing calm, but soon she ought to start. The queer thing was, she hesitated. She had taken some knocks in Canada, and, now the end of her journey was near, she was half afraid. Since her money had melted, she could not again push ahead.

"I really do not want to get up from your nice chair, but if your horses are rested, I must," she said.

"When you wish to start I am ready, but we will soon make the Hope farm, and you might risk another ten minutes," Bob replied. "For one thing, I have not for some time enjoyed an English girl's society, and although I rather like my cave, you strike a sort of domestic note that I sometimes missed before. I mustn't get entangled, but you, so to speak, complete the picture, if you see what I mean——"

Ruth gave him a clean glance. On the whole, his look was humorous, and she did not know if she really ought to be annoyed. His remark rather excited her curiosity than disturbed her, and she wondered where Mrs. Latimer was. Bob, in fact, was pitiful. The girl obviously did not know her hosts, the Hopes, were broke.

"When you mix your metaphors, you risk an entanglement," she said. "I suppose you feel the house lonely when Mrs. Latimer is not about?"

Bob's twinkle puzzled her, but he went across to a bookshelf and came back with a photograph.

"Bellinda! Might I present him? The portrait is pretty good."

"The young fellow in the picture balanced a long axe. Ruth noted his fine pose, his tilted head, and his careless smile. His clothes were the loose shirt and overall trou-

sers Western farmers use in summer, but Ruth knew his type. He was Latimer's sort and hers.

"Your partner? But you talked about *Bellinda*."

"And my pal," said Bob. "His proper name is Lancelot Crossfield Lucy, and in consequence, he's Bellinda. Jane was the boys' first choice, but it led to their confusing him with a neighbor's wife. Canadian humor is not remarkably subtle, and when I hired up on a Manitoba farm they called me Percy. I don't know why I was annoyed, but after a dispute with a large teamster, during which I fell against a hot stove, the boys agreed that I might be Bob. Bellinda was philosophic. He declared he did not boast about his charm; it was inherited."

Ruth reflected that the young fellow's humor might be useful, but when one was a girl and one's money was gone, to be philosophical was hard.

"But where is Mr. Lucy?" she inquired.

"Not long since he was at Victoria, and since he thought about buying the milk wagon, he might have stopped. In Canadian cities you can get comparatively fresh milk, but I imagine Bellinda could persuade you to buy stuff you knew was bad."

"Then, your friend is driving a milk cart for a dairyman?" said Ruth with frank surprise.

"He was. You see, he's the sort of fellow whom adventure calls, but he cannot get beyond Victoria and yet be British, because Canada stops there. If I had his talents, I'd go south, and sell the Americans real estate; but mine are sternly utilitarian, and I undertook to run the farm. Besides, I like my cave."

Ruth liked the house. Perhaps its difference from all others she had known was its charm, but she wondered.

Latimer's talk might account for something, and she felt he struck the proper careless note.

"Some houses are friendly," she remarked. "But did you and Mr. Lucy dig the cave?"

"We bought it from an Iclander, and put up the matchboarding and so forth. At one time, our ancestors burrowed in the soil, and when you are underground you cheat the heat and cold."

"The handbooks for emigrants state Canadian air is dry, and in consequence heat and cold do not bother you."

"The railroad and emigration agents' business is to encourage illusion like that; they're a remarkably optimistic lot. But dry air! At Winnipeg when the summer thunderstorms sweep the plains? And in August at Montreal, when all who can buy a ticket go downriver to Saguenay, and some don't stop until they make Lake St. John. My hat! If one could watch the optimists load cordwood in a northwest blizzard. However, I mustn't daunt you, and we are rather obviously not yet dead. You will, no doubt, front it as well as another, and since you like the Cave, I hope you will sometimes come back."

"You are kind," said Ruth. "But I must go."

Bob went for his horses, and they took the trail. The light was going, and the evening got cold. For a time Bob concentrated on his driving, and Ruth was not keen to talk. Martha Hope was her last refuge; she could go no farther west. There was the trouble, because she could not go back, but she must not be an embarrassment to her hosts. By and by she turned to Bob.

"Do you think I ought to have left Winnipeg?"

"If you had not got a post, I think you took the proper line. When the snow blows across the plains work stops,

and Winnipeg is crowded by people who have no job. In spring they drift back to the farms, and if you like the city, all you have got to do is to wait."

"I don't like the city," Ruth rejoined.

"The plains have some advantages," said Bob, and stopped for a moment, as if he pondered. "Well, Hope is the proper man to advise you, but if Adam cannot help, you might consult with me. Sometimes I have a happy thought, and although I don't know if I'd be useful, I might. Anyhow, I'd try."

Ruth imagined he would do so, and she thought him one whom she could trust. She knew he cogitated, and she had noted that his look got thoughtful once or twice before.

"Very well. In some circumstances, I might look you up."

Bob indicated two birds, rather like large partridges, at the bottom of the wagon.

"I mustn't forget. They're for Mrs. Hope. Shot three or four days since, and she can use them when she likes. Although I'm afraid the cock's an old-timer, they are prairie *chicken*; but when you think about it, in Scotland bacon, and sometimes salted mutton, is ham, and in London a fresh egg may be four weeks old——"

Ruth tried to play up. He had perhaps an object for his jokes, but he must not think she brooded. At length a light pierced the falling dusk, and she saw a wheat bin in the stubble, and a small wooden house. When Bob shouted her heart beat.

The team stopped, and Hope, at the homestead door, turned to his wife.

"Bob and a young woman I don't know! She's going to get down."

"It's Ruth," said Mrs. Hope. "Oh, Adam! And I must give them supper; but all we have got——"

"Come on," said Hope. "The girl's your pal."

He firmly pushed her off the step, and helped Bob carry Ruth's trunk to the house. When he looked up his wife was kissing her guest. Martha, perhaps, had got a knock, but she had braced up.

"If I had but known I'd have got you a better supper," she said. "You will stop, Bob?"

"Miss Allen is not fastidious; she took supper with me, and I must push off," said Bob. "Perhaps you can use the prairie chicken."

He put down the birds and went off. Ruth thought he went as fast as possible, but Hope gave her his hand.

"Martha has talked about you; you are not a stranger," he said. "We are rather a primitive lot, but we will try to fix things right for you."

Ruth thought him kind, but Mrs. Hope put her arm round her and carried her off.

CHAPTER VIII

HARMON'S LAST COMPETITOR

THE evening got cold, and Mrs. Olsen pushed fresh wood into the stove. She picked thin blocks, because her stock was not large and winter was long. At one time Hans now and then took a holiday in Indian summer, and brought home a load from the bluffs, but Hans was dead, and to hire a team and chopper cost much. In consequence, when the days got short, Mrs. Olsen went soon to bed, for by and by the stove must burn all night. In the morning, however, the mail-carrier would arrive, and she must answer the printed questions in a document sent by the post-office at Winnipeg.

Mrs. Olsen polished her steel-rimmed spectacles and frowned. The questions were numerous and her English was not good. The store was built of ship-lap boards and lighted by a large nicked lamp, like the lamps that hung from the roofs of the Canadian Pacific cars. When Hans Olsen arrived there was not another store at Glencoyne, and he supplied every article a frontiersman required. Now the stock was smaller, and, but for the post-office, Mrs. Olsen doubted if she could keep the business going. 'There was the trouble, because one or two letters and parcels had recently got lost.

Minna Olsen was Scandinavian and carried her age well. For all her white hair and wrinkled skin, when she stood for a moment by the stove her figure was tall and straight, like a Norway pine. When customers were

about, she did not use spectacles, and her calm gray eyes and firm mouth gave her a touch of dignity. All the same, to sort the mail in the corner railed off from the canned stuff and drygoods got harder, and sometimes when the day was dark she was bothered to note down the goods the boys carried off.

When Minna was at the immigrant sheds in Winnipeg, Hans arrived from Minnesota by the Pembina trail, and in a week they were married. He was a good husband, and they built the first store at Glencoyne; engaging help only to raise the heavy posts and plates. Nobody had much money, but the farmers were honest, and until Hans started from the railroad one winter morning with a load of goods, all went well. At noon an arctic storm broke; at dusk the exhausted team reached home in blinding snow, but Hans was not on the driving-seat, and when they lifted him from the wagon bottom Minna knew her man was dead.

Somehow she kept the store going, but when Harmon built another her customers fell away. Minna's English was not good, and her store was not, like Harmon's, a sort of farmers' club. Yet, in the last twelve months, some whom Harmon had supplied came back to her, and one or two fresh customers bought her goods. She gave good weight, and the settlers began to be afraid of Harmon's growing power. Minna was afraid, but the Olsen store was hers, and she meant to fight for it.

She looked up. Somebody got off a horse, she heard steps, and Sergeant McBride came in. Mrs. Olsen pushed the papers across her desk and got up graciously. McBride knew good manners, and when his duty allowed, he himself was polite.

"The cold, I tank, get worse. I will make you some coffee. No?" she said.

"Ye will not bother, mistress, and I mustn't stop. But what about the letter Pete Wilshaw claims was stolen?"

"I do not know; the post-office ask," said Mrs. Olsen in slow and careful English. "It is in the evening, two days before the mail, and some people are in the store. He look at them and laugh. 'If Mother Olsen lose that letter, it is a long time before I get some clothes.'"

"Pete did not tell you some money was in the envelope?"

"Afterwards he tell me. His order and the twenty dollars did not arrive."

McBride weighed two or three circumstances. Wilshaw was Harmon's customer, and the sergeant imagined owed him some money. Yet he had publicly stated he was sending to Winnipeg for goods his creditor could supply. Then, since his audience was, no doubt, not sternly logical, his joke might satisfy them that when he mailed his order he enclosed the cash payment the Winnipeg store would demand. McBride wondered——

"Ye put the envelope with the rest? When ye sealed the bag, did ye look if it was there?"

Mrs. Olsen said she did not, and McBride nodded. Sometimes three or four of the boys came in at the last moment when the mail-carrier waited for the bag. He drove out from the railroad twice a week, and Wilshaw's letter was at the office two days. McBride knew the post-office, but he looked about.

The lock on the main door was the sort of lock you could buy from any hardware merchant, and where one could buy a lock another could buy a key. The post-office

end of the counter was railed off, but if you got on the counter, you could step across.

"I suppose ye heard nothing at night ye would not expect to hear?"

"After the store is shut nobody can come in. My room is on top, and when one is old one does not sleep hard."

McBride imagined Minna was not quite certain. She admitted she got old, but she refused to acknowledge she was getting deaf. Minna was resolved to hold down the post-office as long as possible, and McBride sympathized with her ambition. But for the Government pay, he reckoned she must shut the store.

"The bureau at Winnipeg will have asked ye for particulars?" he said.

Mrs. Olsen gave him the inquiry schedule, and a paper on which she had drafted her replies. McBride approved her caution. The crather thought in Norwegian, and when she, so to speak, translated, English entangled her. For the most part, the inquiries related to the lost envelope, but a few questions, written by hand, excited the sergeant's curiosity, since they seemed to indicate that somebody had complained to the Winnipeg officers that the Glencoyne mail service was not good. On the whole, Mrs. Olsen's replies were rather accurate than judicious. Minna was not a fool, but she did not see all McBride thought he saw.

"Ye might lave me make a few notes," he said. "Report-writing is a job a policeman must study, and wan does not soon get the proper thrick av it. The gentlemen in Government offices are thirsting for information, and ye try to tell them what ye think they would like to know. But ye use discretion, and ye do not always tell

them all ye know. Is it your will, mistress, that I would draft the replies?"

Minna gave him her chair at the desk. But for the faint twinkle in his frosty blue eyes, McBride was altogether a Royal North-West sergeant. Minna knew him a kind and useful friend. For ten minutes, he pondered and wrote. The postmistress was a foreigner and her English must not be conspicuously good. Well, that was easy, because his was not first-class. The bureau must not remark her cleverness, although since somebody had complained about the mail service, they must not think her a fool. In fact, her part was the naïvely honest witness, who does as much harm as possible to the prosecutor's case. Perhaps only an Irish Scot could have as subtly struck the proper note, but when the sergeant got up he smiled.

"For a modest man, I'm thinking the job is good," he said. "Ye will be satisfied to copy my remarks."

Mrs. Olsen thanked him, and when he went off she got to work. Her writing was slow and labored, but after five or ten minutes she stopped and looked up with surprise, for Harmon came in.

"You're alone?" he said. "I thought I heard a trooper's horse."

"The sergeant was here, but he go soon. He ask if I have found Pete Wilshaw's letter."

"Sometimes old Mack is meddlesome. I don't know if the job is a police job, unless the mail bosses ask them to investigate. When there's trouble at a post-office, they like to fix things, and they fix them good."

Mrs. Olsen waited, standing, for all her age, firmly braced. She did not invite Harmon to sit down, and he

leaned against the counter and pushed back his large plug hat.

"Twenty dollars is quite a useful sum, but I don't know as I'm sorry for Pete; he could have bought all the clothes he wanted at my store. I'm sorry for you. I guess that letter isn't going to be found, and if you didn't hold down the post-office, you couldn't run the store. Anyhow, I doubt if you will run it long."

A touch of angry color came to Mrs. Olsen's lined face, but she knew the large, fat man she fronted, and she tried for calm.

"The spoiled harvest broke the boys," he resumed. "I might carry on the customers I trust, but the rest must quit, and when you haven't got a mortgage, you can't seize their goods. I allow they're honest, and they might send you a few dollars when they hit a job in spring; but, if you lose the post-office, before the ice breaks you'll be gone."

"You do not know. You talk loud, and you tank everybody listen."

Harmon laughed. He did not pretend to conciliate, and his plan was the front attack. Perhaps his luck was good, but so far he had broken his antagonists, and he had forces in reserve about which nobody at Glencoyne knew.

"As a rule, the boys do listen," he rejoined coolly. "You want to weigh my proposition, Minna, and there's no use in getting mad. Well, I have a pretty good bank-roll, and I'll buy your store. When you like to hand over I'll write you a check, and you can go home to Norway; Assiniboia is not the country for lone old folk. I don't want to cheat you, and I'll state my price right now——"

For a few moments Mrs. Olsen said nothing. The sum Harmon fixed was, perhaps, two-thirds of the sum her

store and stock were worth; he, of course, knew who owed her money, and whose debts were bad. In Norway, nothing an old woman really needed costs much, and if she were frugal, she might live. But the friends of her youth were gone. If she went home, she would be a stranger, and in the dark days, when the sun never rose from behind the mountains, she must brood by the stove, alone. After all, Canada was home. Her husband was buried there, and Hans was a good man.

Then Harmon roused a queer antagonism. Minna disliked him for the prosperity his fine black clothes indicated. Hans had been satisfied with overalls; he was tall and thin, and his blue eyes were kind. Harmon's large body, somehow, was gross, his eyes were black, and his glance calculating. He leaned insolently against the counter and studied her with a sort of cruel smile.

▶ "If you tank my store do not pay, for what do you want to buy?"

"Looks quite a sensible question," Harmon replied. "Well, for one thing I'm not an old woman, and I guess my wad will see me through. When the good times come I don't want a competitor. I reckon they are going to come."

"Then, like you, I wait."

"You can't," said Harmon coolly. "Nobody knows when the tide will turn, and it mightn't be for three or four years; but when the world's wheat prices steady and the boys get seed that ripens quick, trade at Glencoyne will boom. To wait is going to cost me high, and I'm betting all I've got. I'll be right here to take the money, but you'll lose the post-office, and be gone by spring. You want to sell out while my proposition stands."

Mrs. Olsen's tall figure got straighter, and red touched

the strained skin over her high cheek-bones. After all, she sprang from stubborn Viking stock.

"The store is mine. I do not sell to you," she said. "And I do not go."

Harmon's keenness was notorious. He knew she could not be moved, and he shrugged.

"Well, well. I'm through! You're obstinate, Minna, and you're going to be sorry."

When he was gone Mrs. Olsen laboriously resumed her writing. If he could, Harmon would break her, and she admitted she was rash; but she would, at all events, hold on as long as possible, and in order to do so she must satisfy the Winnipeg post-office.

Harmon, in the kitchen behind his store, tossed his hat on the table, and when he sat down Pearl heard his chair crack. Looking up from her sewing, she gave him a thoughtful glance. Caution was indicated, but to some extent her father gave her his confidence.

"Looks as if Minna was stubborn," she remarked.

"Sure she is," said Harmon with a frown. "All the same, she's going. I've got to break her."

He implied that he would sooner not. Pearl had not much pity for Mrs. Olsen, but her curiosity was excited.

"I reckon it won't bother you much," she said.

"In a way that is so. I can cut her prices, and I can put the screws to some bright young fellows who think they can trade at both stores. For all that, I was willing to buy her out."

Pearl nodded. Her father's talents were not as remarkable as he thought, and he perhaps owed his advance to his concentration and industry; but he was not a fool. Pearl imagined he saw that he must reckon on some sympathy for his beaten competitor.

"Yes," she said, "you drive folks. When they have got sand, they kick."

"So far, I've driven them where I want," Harmon rejoined. "I've got the best half of the trade old Hans Olsen did, the livery's mine, and I can claim the hotel when I like. And I've got some farms——"

He stopped. Modesty had nothing to do with it, for Pearl knew he rather liked to boast. Sometimes his rapid advance puzzled her. Although he was not scrupulous, he did not frankly cheat, and his debtors got goods and money for the mortgages they gave. Yet when he arrived at Glencoyne he certainly was not rich. Pearl, in fact, had wondered where he got the money.

"An old foreign woman isn't a dangerous competitor. Maybe it would pay you to leave her alone," she said.

"No," said Harmon, "Minna has got to quit. I've not yet been baffled, and if you stop for a setback, you might stop for another. Then the old fool would talk. If she bluffed buck Harmon, some other folk might try. I guess I'll show them——"

He lighted a cigar, and Pearl mused. In a way, she thought her father's resolve superstitious. For some time he had gone where he planned to go, but if he began to hesitate he imagined his luck might turn.

"Maybe you're right, Pop," she said in a soothing voice, and resumed her sewing.

CHAPTER IX

AN UNWILLING WITNESS

SERGEANT McBRIDE one afternoon got down from his horse at the livery yard and gave Waring the bridle. Three or four wagons were parked in the yard, and Harmon leaned against the doorpost of a workshop at the stable end, as if he conversed with somebody inside.

"Pete is mending harness for Leslie," McBride remarked. "I have been waiting for some talk with him, and when ye have tied the horses, ye might observe the way it goes."

Waring was ambitious and willing to learn, but sometimes he doubted if the chiefs at Regina would approve the methods the sergeant used. When McBride reached the workshop door, Wilshaw looked up. He was a big, dark-skinned fellow, and although he was not industrious, he cut and sewed leather skillfully. Since the farmers usually threw away old harness they themselves could not mend, he was not much occupied, and sometimes for a few weeks he vanished in the northern woods, from which he carried back a few skins. Moreover, he now and then engaged for guide to a hunting party from the cities or a Government survey expedition. Now he sewed a new strap for a headstall.

"'Tis a neat touch ye have," said McBride. "The end shaved for the buckle clip, an' the thread tight filling the holes. I would say the stitches would stand as long as the leather."

Wilshaw put down his tools, and pushed back his battered soft hat with a sort of defiant carelessness. He reckoned McBride had not got down in order to talk about the strap.

"Why," he said, "to sew is my business."

"Could you beat Pete's job, Sergeant?" Harmon inquired. "Nobody knows how much you know, and I guess you won't tell."

"An old mounted policeman is something of a saddler, but if I could handle the awl like Pete, I'd be where the pay is good at a harness factory. The trouble is, at the factory ye must start when the whistle blows and ye must take orders from the boss. Pete, maybe, would sooner start and stop when he likes. To be indipident is a fine thing, but I reckon it's expensive at Glencoyne, where he might earn ten dollars in a month. Did ye earn ten dollars these last four weeks, Mr. Wilshaw?"

"I haven't got them yet," said Wilshaw modestly.

Harmon sat down on a tool-box, and Waring leaned against the wall. He began to see McBride was not altogether talking at large, and he imagined Harmon wanted to signal Wilshaw, but dared not risk it.

"For them to lose your letter was unfortunate," the sergeant resumed. "Twenty dollars is a useful sum, and more than anybody thought ye would have. But ye did mail the letter?"

"The boys heard him joke about it when he handed old Minna the envelope," Harmon remarked.

"They did not see him put the bills in the envelope," McBride rejoined, and gave Wilshaw a swift, searching glance. "Where did ye get that money, Pete?"

"Have you some right to ask me?" Wilshaw inquired in a sullen voice.

"He can't force you to answer, but I guess you might," said Harmon soothingly.

"Well, I reckon the boys know I was packing for the naturalist fellow who camped by Butler Lake. When he was through I shoved on for Swift Creek, for some skins he wanted."

"Then, ye took the queer road, because ye started *north*. Our patrol hit your trail two or three days' good traveling beyond the lake."

Wilshaw's look got thoughtful, and Waring imagined him disturbed. The shortest line from the lake to the creek was west.

"He can take the road he likes, Mack, and it hasn't much to do with his losing his letter," Harmon remarked.

"Are you advising Pete?" McBride inquired.

Harmon said nothing, and the sergeant resumed, as if he addressed nobody in particular:

"If wan went straight north from the lake, wan would not be far from the Blackfoots' reserve. Smuggling liquor for the Indians is a profitable traffick, but dangerous, and they've resolved at Regina that it must be stopped——" He turned and fronted Wilshaw. "Ye state ye put twenty dollars in the letter for Winnipeg. The mail bureau is sending an inspector to Glencoyne, and he'll need to be satisfied. Would ye be sure ye did not mislay them bills?"

Waring, studying the group, thought Wilshaw hesitated; he certainly glanced at Harmon, but it looked as if the other refused to signal.

"The bills were by me when I went for the envelope—I don't see how I could forget. And I haven't got them."

"Sometimes one misremembers," McBride remarked. "Before the inspector arrives I would go through the

pockets in my clothes and search the shack. Wan must not make throuble, unless wan is forced. That's all, I think. Good day to yez."

He signed Waring and got on his horse. Waring waited until they were in the open plain; and then inquired:

"Is the fellow smuggling liquor?"

"I would not say, but it's possible, and when the time's convenient, I'm hoping to investigate," McBride replied, and resumed with a dry smile: "Yez may stop crime by punishing the criminal, but in some circumstances to warn him he might be co't is as good a plan."

When the police were gone, Wilshaw clenched his fist.

"Do you think the blasted sergeant *knows*?"

"He does not," said Harmon soothingly. "If he did know, you'd be in the pen. I guess Mack was experimenting, and you had better stick to your tale about those bills."

Wilshaw swore. "You reckon you can use me. If I've got to take a chance, I'd sooner be up against you than Mack. Get that straight, and watch your step."

Harmon shrugged scornfully.

"You're easy scared, Pete; but you want to weigh things," he said in a meaning voice, and went off.

A week after McBride interviewed Wilshaw, a group of farmers nooned and brewed tea behind a bluff. Latimer and two or three more had stopped for the night at the railroad settlement, and were going home with empty wagons. Hope and one or two others were going in with loads of wheat. They had fixed the bluff for rendezvous because it was about half-way between Walpole and Glencoyne and a convenient spot for teamsters to rest their

horses. Moreover, it had advantages for a council that might attract curiosity at a hotel.

The day was cold and the trees were bare. Where the dead leaves had drifted, the birches' pale gold splashed the poplars' fading green and brown, but the thin trunks cut the wind. Blue smoke tossed about the snapping fire; the men had got out their old skin coats, and loafed, uncouth and shaggy, on its windward side. The horses nosed the dead grass; wild ducks, flying in wedge formation, trailed across the sky.

"The black geese have gone and now the ducks are moving south," said one. "Winter will soon be here, but before the snow falls I reckon all the wheat we have raised will be on the cars. I don't know if I'll be in Assiniboia when the brant come back. If I could pack my homestead across the boundary, I'd get going now."

"Kevan and some more moved their teams," another remarked. "All the same, I aim to hold on. My lean-to's full of potatoes, and when I've banked her up with turf and dirt, they, maybe, won't freeze. The trouble is, you can't grow groceries and salt pork. We are up against the question, where we're going to get them?"

"Bob is interlocutor. Start something, son," said a third farmer.

"Very well. The Winnipeg post-office inspector went out on the evening train. I was unloading and durstn't leave my team. Some of you saw the fellow."

"Jardine and I were at the hotel," said one. "We thought him straight. He told us the bureau wanted to give us a good mail service, and since they'd had one or two complaints, he'd like to know if we were satisfied. We told him we reckoned Mother Olsen a bully postmistress."

"The complaints were from the livery and the

Murchison House," Jardine remarked. "I can't state that Harmon put up Leslie and Murchison to grumble, but he's a pretty hard creditor, and if he said so, they durstn't refuse."

"You have got to be just," said another. "Harmon's hard, all right, and he begins to act as if the settlement was his, but he's a useful man. He'll find you a job; if you find a job and want a team or tools, he'll fix you up. You have got to pay, but he runs some risk. Then if he did not grub-stake us until our crop is thrashed, a number of us must quit."

"A just storekeeper is a useful man," Hope agreed. "But you must decide if you're willing for Harmon to be the only storekeeper at Glencoyne. I see some objections. You might think up some more."

The objections were rather obvious, for all knew Harmon's unscrupulous greediness. Ashton looked up, and his brown skin went darkly red.

"He sweated me for all I had, but I pay my debts. If you let the swine get a strangle-hold, you deserve to choke."

Bob gave him a keen glance. When Tom talked about all he had, he thought about his wife. In the meantime, however, he must not be allowed to indulge his revengeful passion.

"I am chairman," he said. "I suppose the inspector inquired about Wilshaw's missing letter?"

"He called Pete to the post-office; Mrs. Olsen told me the tale," Jardine replied. "When Pete came to think about it, he was not plumb certain he did put the bills in the envelope. All the same, he'd meant to do so, and the money was not at his shack. He, however, was at Walpole not long afterwards and he bought some truck."

Three or four laughed. For a Glencoyne citizen to state he did not know where twenty dollars went was a first-class joke.

"To declare the job was framed might be libelous, but it looks like that," Hope remarked.

"Jardine holds the floor, and we will allow him to go ahead," said Bob. "Does Mother Olsen keep the post-office, Jim?"

"She has first option on the job, but she must fix two or three things different, and she must get her competent help. Minna's kind of bothered. She won't have Harmon freeze her out, but she don't see how she can pay a clerk."

"Thank you, Jim; that's all. Hope will speak his piece."

Hope, resting his back against a trunk, stretched his legs to the fire. By contrast with his youth, Bob thought Adam's soberness humorous, but he somehow commanded his audience. All were young, and none but Ashton was an expert farmer. Sun and dust had browned their skin, their bodies were lean and muscular, but their most useful quality was perhaps their Anglo-Saxon stubbornness. In the Northwest man's part was protagonist, and when Hope began to talk he struck the proper note.

"I reckon you know all we are up against. We are a sort of advance-guard, and we haven't yet got the supplies and tools we need. On a hundred and sixty acre block you can't keep the men and teams you ought to use for the first few weeks when the frost leaves the ground, but if the seed is not in soon, the crop is frozen in the fall. When the wheat springs, you risk drought, and rust, blowing grit from the sand belts, and hail. For all that, if we can hold the fort, by and by the implement makers

and botanists will come to help; but Nature is not our worst antagonist."

"Nobody is too poor to be robbed," said Bob. "When the good years come, I'd hate to see Harmon, for instance, get away with my reward. All the same, unless we take the proper line, he might."

One or two nodded moodily; the others waited, with tight mouths and knitted brows.

"The next harvest will save us or break us," Hope resumed. "We need supplies for twelve months, our capital's exhausted, and our credit's bad. If Harmon sees us through, the harvest, and our farms, will be his. So far, and to some extent, competition has limited his greediness, but if he gets rid of Mrs. Olsen he'll give the screws an extra twist. Minna is our last hope, and she mustn't go."

It looked as if the hope was a forlorn hope. Mrs. Olsen was a foreigner and old, her capital, like theirs, had melted, and Harmon, by contrast, was rich, and unscrupulous.

"How are we going to keep her?" one inquired. "If we take her stuff and can't pay, all we will do is to pull her down."

"I believe she'll risk it," Bob rejoined. "Minna is Scandinavian, and she hates to be beaten. Then Montreal and Winnipeg merchants know when they must wait. Canada's the land of hope and promise. You promise to pay for the goods you get and the other fellow hopes you will."

"Something like that is the rule in the Old Country," a young fellow remarked. "When your tailor bothers you, you order some fresh clothes."

"If I must mortgage my farm, I'd sooner Minna was my creditor; she'd be just," said Hope. "But we can help in another way. I got about two hundred dollars for

some third-grade wheat, and my wad goes to the Olsen store. Then sometimes one hires out one's team. So long as Minna can put up a few dollars, the wholesale merchants will keep her going. Cash money carries some weight at Winnipeg."

"She'll get my lot," said another, and all but two agreed.

"Jake and I can't join you," said Ashton moodily. "If Harmon knew we were paid for hauling wheat, he'd claim the bills; but we are not going to help him spot your plan. If you can baffle the swine, good luck to you."

They went for their horses, and when Bob took the trail he smiled. He had reckoned on Hope's carrying the boys along; Adam's queer soberness was persuasive. By and by, of course, Harmon would spot their plan, and then they must put up a fight. In the meantime, the greater part of the cash with which they supported his competitor was perhaps, in stern equity, his. Bob doubted if Harmon would see the joke.

CHAPTER X

RUTH'S COUNSELOR

BOB was chopping wood. He had loaded his wagon behind the bluff and harnessed his team, but he did not know when he could get back for the last one or two logs he had sawn. Winter was long, and since he refused to cut the trees on the butte, he mustn't risk his woodpile's getting low. He might load up the lot and yet get home before dark; besides, he rather liked to split wood.

When the small logs were sawn across, one fixed a bolt upright and swinging the long axe, aimed for its center. If one's aim was good and the blade keen, the block split obliquely, as an orange splits, along the diverging rays. At all events, it ought to do so, but birch is cross-grained stuff, and Bob's axe twice jammed in the knot where a branch had sprung. He was, however, not going to be baffled by an obstinate lump of wood, and he might cut the hard spot from the other side. His light waistcoat went on the load; his firmly-molded body swung with his circling arms, the shining blade crashed, and the bolt fell apart. Picking up the halves, he tossed them in the wagon.

"Now you're done with!" he gasped.

Somebody laughed, and, looking up, he saw Ruth Allen on a horse. The saddle was a side-saddle, and the girl's skirt, in the fashion of the period, was not remarkably unlike a riding habit. Bob's rules were the rules of the period, and he jumped for his coat, but when he pulled it

over his arms he got entangled, and the sleeve tore open at the shoulder seam.

"I am afraid that is done with, but you ought not to have bothered," Ruth remarked.

"Oh, well," said Bob, "my speed was a sort of mechanical reaction. You are rather obviously Old Country English, if you see what I mean."

"It's rather intricate, but I expect you mean to be nice," Ruth rejoined.

Bob gave her an interested glance. Since he, so to speak, dumped her at Mrs. Hope's, he had not met Miss Allen. Dumped was perhaps the proper word. Anyhow, he had driven off as fast as possible, but in the circumstances, he thought his object was good. In the meantime, her forlorn look had vanished and a touch of color had come to her skin. Her face was no longer pinched, and perhaps her lines were rounder. In fact, she had an attractiveness he had not before remarked. Then she knew something about horses; Western farmers, as a rule, used a team and rig, and Mrs. Hope could not ride the queer-tempered brute that now stood quietly.

"If I could find a thin wire nail——" he said.

"I haven't one, and a young woman who is careful about her clothes does not use safety-pins."

"You are pretty keen," said Bob. "Well, when you cannot get the article you want, you must be resigned to go without, and a plainsman soon gets the habit. However, you were going for a ride, and I suppose you heard my axe?"

For a moment Ruth hesitated; and then she gave him a level glance.

"I did hear your axe, but when I started I meant to look

you up. I am rather bothered, and I thought you might advise me."

"Is not Hope the proper man?"

"I think not, and I cannot ask Mrs. Hope, because I expect she would sooner be kind than frank. I ought, perhaps, not to bother you."

Bob began to see a light, and since he could not get into his jacket, he pulled on his skin coat.

"Very well. I don't know if I'm a first-class counselor, but I'll try to be honest. However, the wind is keen, and one cannot weigh things properly when one is cold. Afternoon tea is not a prairie function, but it might help us cogitate, and you were at the Cave before."

In England, when Victoria was queen, a young woman did not visit at a bachelor's house. Ruth, however, was in the Northwest, and imagined she might use frontier rules. Bob got in the wagon and started his team. The sun was low and the sky went green, but the distance was not, as in an English landscape, soft and indistinct. The small blue woods carried Ruth's glance to others farther back; the gentle inclines, faintly marked by shadows, rolled in long succession. She felt the horizon was not the picture's boundary; the quiet plain rolled on forever. In its spaciousness one sensed freedom, and although her thoughts had been moody, fresh hope began to spring.

When they reached his homestead Bob put the horses in the stable and Ruth went to the kitchen. A small fire burned in the stove, and after the keen wind the warmth was soothing. Ruth threw in fresh wood and smiled when she heard the blocks snap and the draught throb in the pipe. She liked the Cave; it perhaps touched a primitive vein in her. By contrast with the lonely plain, its

smallness was homelike, and Latimer had said something about one's being safe in the friendly earth.

When he came in he went to the second room for another jacket and brewed some tea. Ruth had begun to like green tea and sweet condensed milk, and the cold, hard biscuits did not bother her. On the plains nobody was fastidious, and he gave her the best he had. All the same, when the battered teapot was empty, she did not go directly to her object. To hesitate now was ridiculous, but, after all, a discreet young woman did not invite an almost strange young man to be her counselor.

"I am really accountable for your tearing your coat," she said. "Have you a needle and some sewing thread?"

"Sure," said Bob and gave her the articles. "I don't know if I ought to allow you to make good the damage. And might I inquire if you have mended clothes before?"

"You might wait and see," said Ruth. "I mustn't claim to be remarkably competent, but the mend will be neater than yours would be if you used a wire nail."

She got to work, and Bob asked for leave to light his pipe. If she had forgotten she wanted his advice, he was satisfied. To see an attractive Old Country girl in his kitchen, occupied by a job for him, was something fresh, and he admitted he would rather like her to stop for good. Ruth herself was not altogether unconscious of the picture's domestic charm. Somehow the Cave was friendly, and although she certainly did not want to stop for good, she was willing, for a time, to indulge its occupant.

"Thank you," he said when she gave him the coat. "The job is neater than mine might have been. If you would like another, I have some overalls."

Ruth turned and fronted him. Her glance was level and challenging.

"When I met you at Walpole station why did you not tell me I ought not to go to Mrs. Hope's?"

"Well," said Bob, as if he pondered, "for a stranger the ground was awkward, and I suppose I must use some caution now. However, it looked as if you had had a thin time, and if you didn't join the Hopes, I did not see where you could go. Then I yet think you took the proper line."

"I do not see your grounds. Another time, I expect you will not be keen to make yourself accountable for a forlorn young woman?"

"We might let it go. Where my help is useful, I'd rather like to help, and you never know—— In the meantime, you asked for my advice."

"It perhaps looks ungracious, but I was forced. I cannot consult with Martha Hope, I have not another friend, and I thought of you."

"Exactly! The French *mot* perhaps meets the bill," said Bob. "However, we mustn't apologize. Let's be practical."

"Then, the Hopes cannot support a useless guest; although they pretend nobly, I'm a horrible embarrassment. I would hate to go back to Winnipeg, and, in a way, I'm afraid; but, if I was not fastidious, do you think I could get a post at Brandon, or Regina?"

"In spring, you might; but when the snow falls people whose work it stops crowd the prairie towns. Then, you see, when harvest's bad, trade of every sort is slack."

Ruth's mouth went tight. Bob admitted he was perhaps brutally frank, but he tried to think for her. Anyhow, when trade languished and all must be frugal, she must not front the winter in a wheat-belt town.

"Then, where can I go?" she asked, and laughed, a

queer, defiant laugh. "At Winnipeg I was told, not delicately, that I might marry a farmer—I was not attracted, and Hope declares all he knows are broke. But I'm not humorous; I begin to feel I'm *desperate*."

Bob nodded, sympathetically. "Well, you might weigh my plan. It has, of course, some disadvantages, but I do not see another. Anyhow, if you would take the post, I expect Mrs. Olsen would engage you at the Glencoyne store. Old Minna is Scandinavian, but she's a first-class sort."

"I would take any post," said Ruth, and her eyes began to sparkle. "To think I might be independent is splendid, and I will not be greedy. If, for a time, I can get food and clothes—— But do you think she would engage me? And would I be useful?"

"The pay would not be large. I expect you could sort the mail, and write up post-office schedules in better English than Minna's. When she is cleaning house and cooking, to weigh stuff for her customers and note their purchases oughtn't to be hard; and she would, no doubt, ask you to live at the store. If you like, I will take you across."

"It looks splendid," Ruth declared. "All the same I would sooner Mrs. Hope went with me."

"Sometimes I'm rather dull," Bob admitted. "Since I expect you will get the post, there is something you ought to know——"

He told her about Wilshaw's letter and Harmon's supposititious scheme to banish competition and rule the settlement. Ruth's interest was obvious, and Bob knew her on the farmers' side. In fact, he had from the beginning known Miss Allen was not the sort of girl who was

satisfied to court men's admiration and think about fashionable clothes.

"Yes," she said when he stopped, "I think you ought to fight. And where it's possible, I would like to help. But since I joined the Hopes I have heard much about Western farming. And if you had nothing to fear from Harmon, you would be anxious?"

"We would. I think I stated that you are keen."

"You have done so, Mr. Latimer. I do not see why you should think my intelligence remarkable. However, I dare say you meant to be nice, and you might go ahead."

Bob gave her an apologetic smile. Not long since she was badly daunted; she herself admitted she was desperate. Now her eyes sparkled and her voice struck a fresh and joyous note. She had got back hope, and with hope courage. After all, he was willing to think he had something to do with it.

"Very well. The bad years run in cycles and we have fronted three or four. Another thin harvest would break us, but I reckon the wheel has gone full circle, and we are betting on its upward spin. Since we have borne the worst that hail and frost can do, we mustn't allow the storekeeper to push us off our farms."

"You must riot, and you will not," Ruth agreed. "Hope has told me something, and your fight is a splendid fight. At Mrs. Olsen's I might be useful—I cannot be much of a champion, but after all, I might be your confederate."

She got up and looked about. The little kitchen was shadowy; the sky behind the glass was smoky red.

"It gets dark, and I must start. Thank you, Mr. Latimer. When I met you I was lucky, and you have been kinder than you know."

Bob went for her horse and put her up. When her

foot for a moment touched his hand he knew she was a horsewoman. By and by she melted in the dusky plain, and he went back to the stove. The Cave was warm and hospitable. For long he had been content with it, but now he felt it lonely.

CHAPTER XI

MISS HARMON EXPERIMENTS

THIN snow blew across the plain, and Waring pushed his horse along. The afternoon was horribly cold, and since a biting wind swept the flats, he had not stopped for lunch. Now he thought the snow got thinner, and about a mile in front a dark belt of trees curved across the desolate white level.

Waring knew the timber followed a creek's steep bank, where he might get down, brew some tea, and eat the food he carried. In winter, a prairie ravine is not the spot a tenderfoot would choose for a picnic, but Waring was a police trooper, and for three or four years he had ridden the snowy trail.

At the top of the bank he got down, and, stamping his feet, followed the track that went obliquely to a bridge at the bottom. The hollow was rather like a deep railway cutting, and the poplar branches tossed, but the thin trunks and wild currant bushes cut the wind, and by contrast with the plain the spot was almost warm. Waring stopped by the rude log bridge. The ice was not yet thick; he could get water and dead branches, and he was entitled to a rest. When, with the bank at his back and a fire in front, he had drained a can of hot tea, he might for ten minutes enjoy a smoke. Moreover, when he got to the settlement he might be forced to wait for the mail, and a police trooper must not loaf about the hotel.

Waring admitted he might have a softer job. Winter was beginning soon, and when the snow fell a farmer's

work must stop. When his wheat was in the elevators and he was not hauling cordwood, he could smoke his pipe by the red stove. A Mounted Policeman must front the arctic cold, and if he were sent on exploration patrol, sleep behind a bank of snow. All the same, for ten minutes, he was going to loaf.

A shout pierced the murmur of the trees, and Waring looked up and frowned. Somebody's team had stalled on the hill, and he supposed he must go to help. The fellow had, no doubt, got his dinner at the proper time, but Waring had not. He heard another shout, and thought the voice a girl's. It looked as if she got angry, and he started his horse.

Across the bridge the trail turned, and when he reached the corner a young woman signaled him imperiously. Waring knew her; only Miss Harmon had a fur coat like that, and the light rig and horses were from the Glencoyne livery yard.

"You certainly did not hustle. I called three or four times," she said.

"I'm sorry," said Waring. "I suppose I did not hear you for the wind in the trees. But where's the trouble?"

"A clevis broke, and when I was at Martin's he tied the links with wire. On the hill the stuff pulled out, and unless you fix things, I can't get home."

"Have you got the wire?"

Pearl Harmon laughed. "Sure I have. Maybe you thought a girl would not go back and look for it?"

Waring pulled off his mittens and got to work. His hands were cold, and the wire was stiff, but in three or four minutes the harness was mended.

"It is not a neat piece of work, but I think it will carry you home," he said.

"The settlement is six miles off, and if the snow gets thick, I mightn't keep the trail," said Pearl. "If you like, you may go with me."

Waring would sooner have gone back to the bridge and got his late lunch. Miss Harmon's charm was disturbing, and her queer smile was a challenge he, if he was a farmer, might not refuse. McBride, however, had warned him she was the sort of jade an ambitious young policeman discreetly left alone, and in the Royal North-West discipline was stern. Yet the afternoon was dark and she might lose the trail.

"Very well. If you will start your team, I'll get up."

"You might have got in with me and tied your horse behind the rig. The cold is pretty fierce, but I have a big driving-robe."

Waring refused, politely but firmly. For one thing, a mounted constable must stick to his horse. He thought Pearl studied him with a touch of scornful humor, but she got in, and they climbed the hill. At the top, Waring saw the snow had blown away; the wind that pierced his winter coat was keen as steel. In the dreary landscape's foreground, bleached grass pushed through the thin covering, and the wheel marks on the beaten trail were vaguely blue. Farther back, the wide white flats melted in the low, lead-colored clouds. Pearl let her willing horses go, but by and by she signed Waring near the wheels.

"Looks as if you'd sooner be cold," she said. "Still I s'pose you durstn't drive into the settlement beside a girl, with your horse behind the rig. When you're a North-West trooper, I guess it isn't done? Isn't done in Old Country English, anyhow."

"Some stylists might tell you it wasn't. However, our officers at Regina make the rules."

"They are at Regina. Then you might, of course, have got down before we made the settlement. But I expect a good policeman doesn't calculate; he runs by schedule, and carries out his orders. All the same, the R.N.W. claim they are the settlers' friends, and if it's some comfort, you were kind of forced to see me home."

"Might I state that I was willing?" Waring inquired.

"You feel you have got to be polite? When I called you at the bridge, I expect you thought, 'The fool girl might have known snow was coming, and if she had stopped where she belonged, she wouldn't have worried a tired policeman to ride home with her.'"

Waring had thought something like that, but he was uneasily conscious that it did not altogether account for his annoyance. The real trouble was, he had resolved he would have nothing to do with Miss Harmon, but when he met her his firmness went. Moreover, he imagined she knew. In the circumstances, the proper reply was not very obvious, and to see her pull her furs across most of her face was some relief. A bitter gust, driving dusty snow, swept the plain, and the powdery stuff the wheels threw off stung Waring's skin. He checked his horse and dropped a few yards farther back. The girl, holding her fur collar against her neck, had but one hand for the reins, but he noted her firm control of the speeding team.

The snow blew away, but a bluff half a mile off was a vague black smear. Only a few soft gray touches, like delicate penciling, marked the trail, and when Waring glanced ahead the plain melted in thick cloud. Then the trail melted, and it looked as if they pushed across a desolation the snow had covered since the world began. If it were really so, he thought his companion would front the adventure. Miss Harmon was hard stuff, and one

liked stark pluck. He admitted the prairie sometimes daunted him. In winter, it was as cold as the North Pole.

He, however, must concentrate on finding the settlement, and to see low roofs in the falling dusk was some relief. The street was beaten smooth and the drumming throb of the horses' feet echoed in the ship-lap walls. Lights splashed the snow, and a group by the shining pool-room windows stopped to watch the rig go by.

When Waring helped Pearl down at the livery yard the steam from the horses floated about them like a white cloud. Now the buildings sheltered them, he felt the blood leap to his chilled skin, and noted that Pearl moved awkwardly. Well, at one time, he himself, after a long ride in the frost, could hardly keep his feet. A man carrying a lantern crossed the yard, and Waring asked if the mail-carrier had arrived.

"I guess he'll be late," said the other. "If you have got to pick up some letters, I will take your horse."

"You can't get supper at the Murchison House before six o'clock, and when the mail is sorted you'll want to start," said Pearl. "Come on. I'm 'most frozen, and I'll give you some coffee and biscuits at the store."

Waring went. He had gone without his lunch, and if he refused Miss Harmon's invitation, he might not get his supper. He certainly needed a hot drink and food. Nobody but Harmon was at the store, and when Pearl and Waring came in he gave his daughter a thoughtful glance.

"I was beginning to worry; looks as if she might snow."

"Leslie's harness broke," said Pearl. "But for Mr. Waring I mightn't have got back. I'm going to make some coffee. The cold is fierce."

"Why, of course. Nothing's doing, and I'll go see the

boys at the poolroom. "Go right into the office, trooper, and think you're at home."

A stove snapped in the little room behind the counter, and Waring pulled off his thick coat. After the cold on the plains, the reaction was sharp, and he rather slackly sat down in the nearest chair. He thought he heard Harmon pull on his snow boots and shut the door; and then he braced up. When Miss Harmon came back he must not be asleep. By and by she carried in a loaded tray.

"Mrs. Grant is making supper, but I won't wait for Pop," she said. "Anyhow, she has fixed up something that will carry you on."

Waring agreed that the coffee and hot-cakes were first-class, and when he drained his cup he was sorry he must soon ride off in the wind and dark. The little office was bright and warm, and Pearl was a jolly host. By contrast, the police outpost was bleak, and his breakfast would certainly not be served by an attractive girl. Miss Harmon was attractive; her color and lines and carriage were good, and Waring sensed qualities that did not mark some cultivated girls he had known. She was Buck Harmon's daughter, and that accounted for something, but for all old Mack said, he began to doubt if she had inherited her father's drawbacks.

Pearl gave him an American cigarette, and by and by remarked:

"I s'pose McBride had something to do with that English girl's going to the Olsen store?"

"Then, Mrs. Olsen has got a helper? I shouldn't think McBride had much to do with it. To engage a post-office clerk is not his business."

"Anyhow, you are not going to talk about it? A policeman must watch his step. Well, Mack is clever, and he's

old Minna's friend. But for him, Pete mightn't have forgot if he did mail those bills."

Waring cogitated. Pearl had given him supper. At Glencoyne she was important, and he imagined the favor she had rather imperiously shown him might excite some jealousy. He refused to admit he did not altogether trust her, but he mustn't be a romantic fool. At all events, a police trooper, as she had remarked, must watch his step.

"The sergeant was entitled to inquire about the bills."

"Sure," said Pearl in a careless voice. "Well, if the money wasn't stolen, the letter did not get to Winnipeg. I suppose the police and the mail bosses don't know where it went?"

"I believe McBride hopes to find out, and he's not often baffled," Waring replied.

For a moment Pearl's glance searched his face, and then she smiled.

"Oh, well, letters have gone missing, and we'd begun to be afraid Mother Olsen might lose some more. Now she has help, she'll maybe keep going for a while, but all she can pay is three or four dollars a week, and I can't see why a high-tone Old Country girl took the job."

"Do you know the girl is English?"

"Why, of course!" said Pearl. "You can spot an Englishman and a Mick before he begins to talk. I'd know you were from the Old Country when you were a long ways off."

"That's something," Waring remarked. "I'm not going to apologize."

"Now, you don't want to get mad. So long as you're not superior, we try to be kind to you, but we hate the folks who pretend they're sorry for us. F'r instance, Mrs. Ashton. She can't cook, she can't keep house, and

she's afraid of a horse; she didn't know enough to keep a husband who was fond of her. But she thought Glen-coyne *deadly dull*. We haven't a good milliner, and you can't go to a concert; we haven't a library, and church is once a month. Tom is lucky because she's gone."

Waring thought Miss Harmon typically Western. The plainsmen, and women, he knew, were, perhaps, not honester than other folk, but they, at all events, were frank. Their friendship and hate were open; stark was perhaps the proper word for them. Yet he did not know. Although he mustn't be shabby, Pearl, perhaps, had not invited him to supper altogether for the charm of his society. She had tried to talk about Mack and the post-office. He had refused, and on the whole, he thought his caution justified.

"I am rather sorry for Mrs. Ashton," he said. "After a thin harvest, to get a post might be hard. I expect she'd go first to Winnipeg. Did Ashton try to find her?"

"He was at Winnipeg, but all I know is she did not come back with him."

Waring heard horses' feet in the snow, and when wheels rattled he got up.

"The mail-carrier! I'm not at all keen to go, but you see, I must."

"Oh, well, you can come back another time," said Pearl. "When Pop's not busy he likes to talk. Anyhow, his office is warmer than the freezing trail."

"If you imagine that's all I'd weigh, you're remarkably modest."

"Do you reckon it strange?" said Pearl. "Anyhow, I haven't must use for freshness, and Pop might blow in. Run along for the police letters and hit the trail. If you

are late, Sergeant McBride might want to know where you were."

Waring thanked her for his supper, and she went to the door with him, but when he turned on the top step the door was firmly shut. Waring laughed, and went down the steps. Miss Harmon had perhaps reflected that in the doorway his figure and hers would conspicuously cut the light.

Mrs. Olsen's store was small, and five or six farmers and some Glencoyne people waited for the mail. Ruth, looking up for a moment, saw a young fellow come in. He carried himself like a cavalry officer; she noted the pistol holster on his hip, his riding quirt, and the rather arrogant poise of his head. She thought him a handsome young fellow, but he did not directly front her, and two farmers waited at the desk. When they went, another signed Waring.

"Come on, trooper. My shack's on the next block, but you're for the trail."

Waring pushed through the group, and stopped. The girl at the desk looked up, and he admitted he got something of a jolt. When he last saw her, her clothes were fashionable evening clothes and she occupied a step on the staircase at an English house. Waring himself leaned against a newel post, music floated about them, and in the hall below people danced.

"Ruth?" he said with a sort of gasp.

For a moment Ruth studied him. Sun and frost had browned his skin; his glance was direct, and somehow commanding. His unconscious pose was an athlete's pose. He was not at all the young fellow she had known in the Old Country.

"Yes, Ted," she said. "But a number of people wait. I expect you have called for the police letters?"

"I'd like to talk to you. Why are you here?"

"Then you do not know? But I remember, you went first. Now I am post-office clerk, and you must wait for another time. Here are your letters."

She signed a waiting farmer, and Waring stepped back. The small store was crowded, and he dared not wait for long. Moreover, it looked as if Ruth were willing for him to go, and, pushing to the door, he went for his horse. Ten minutes afterwards the settlement lights got indistinct, and, bracing up sternly, he pushed his horse along the snowy trail.

CHAPTER XII

THE TRACK OF THE STORM

IN WINTER, when the prairie-belt farmers mended harness, the Mounted Police kept the trail, and sometimes went north on exploration patrol. For long half-breed *coureurs* had roamed the wilds, but they had guarded the secrets of their fur preserves. Maps were vague, and when the Dominion Government claimed the Territories nobody but a few Hudson's Bay agents knew much about the tangled forest that rolls back behind Prince Albert and Edmonton to the Arctic barrens.

One could not use horses: the forest was trackless, and in summer one must laboriously portage canoes from river to lake. When all were frozen the hand sledges ran more or less smoothly over the snowy ice, and explorers camped under the thickest pines they could find. On his first excursion, Waring had thought human flesh and blood could not bear the cold, but when he got back to the guard-room all that bothered him was a raw spot where his boot had rubbed his frozen heel.

When, two years afterwards, he and Private Smithson started south for the settlements one bitter morning he thought his luck was good. The patrol they had left might struggle through the woods for five or six weeks, and since the transport of food and blankets was the main obstacle to their stopping longer, Waring and Smithson had helped them carry up and *cache* supplies for use on their return.

For three or four days they made good progress through

rather open, and sometimes burned, forest, where the windfalls were not numerous, and the brush was thin. At the edge of the Park country a blizzard forced them to put up a branch-and-bark hut and camp for forty-eight hours. The storm was bad, but they had shelter, and Waring imagined its worst rage was spent in the open prairie belt. When the wind dropped and he and Smithson pushed off, their food was getting short, and it looked as if they must use some speed.

The Park country is the dark pines' frontier, and as one goes south, thinning woods and bluffs of birch and poplar melt into the open plains. Waring noted that on the bluffs' windward side small trunks were broken, as at some spots the gale had swept the snow from the grass. A sort of after-blow forced him to camp at a wooded ravine two or three hours sooner than he had thought to stop, and when the bitter dawn broke, to face the cold was hard. He, however, hoped to reach the first home-cstead by dark.

At noon they lighted a fire behind a bluff and brewed tea. Waring's numbed feet were galled, and he knew the risk, for in winter a galled foot might not heal. Then the sledge traces had chafed his skin, and his hip-joint ached as if he had sciatica. The cramp was the consequence of sleeping on a frozen bed, and as a rule went off when effort warmed his body; but sometimes it persisted for the morning. He was frankly tired, the day was gloomy, and three or four miles off the gray snow joined the gray sky.

Smithson had thawed his pipe and smoked by the fire. He was a thin, sober young fellow, and talked in a drawling voice, as if he weighed his words. Waring had

known him laugh, but the frontiersmen were not a humorous lot.

"We might make Grant's place for supper," Smithson remarked. "Hauling wheat's expensive; I don't see why folk locate on way-back farms."

"Land is cheap," said Waring. "The Park country is attractive; the water's sweet, and cordwood plentiful. Then to see why one joins the police is hard."

"In the police, you keep going," said Smithson thoughtfully. "When you're not riding the plains, they shove you off in the snow for Athabasca, or maybe Hudson Bay. I started from Hamilton, Ontario, four years since, and I haven't stopped. If my luck stands, I might make the Coppermine."

Since the Coppermine River runs to the Arctic Ocean, Waring reflected that Smithson could not get farther. He had begun to think a typical Canadian's habit was to roam as far as possible. At Montreal one might, with a capital of five dollars, start for Vancouver, and somehow arrive. The excursion might occupy a year or two, but as long as one kept going, one was satisfied.

"All the same, I don't see much real use for the long patrols," Smithson resumed. "While the grub lasts, the sergeant and the boys will stamp through the woods; but he can't use a sextant, and, so far's I know, none can draw a map."

"Oh, well," said Waring, "I dare say the Regina officers' notion is to keep us from getting fat, and to bury the superintendent's reports is a job for an Ottawa clerk. However, unless we make the Grant homestead before the light goes, we must sleep in the snow."

Getting up stiffly, he pulled the galling traces over his shoulders. As a rule, on the high plains the snow is thin,

but keen frost had dried the stuff, and it was loose like flour. The runners did not slide; they plowed through the powder and tossed it back by the faint blue channels in the sledge's wake. Smithson went in front, because, by rule, his business was to break the trail, and the icy dust that floated back stung Waring's face.

A bluff on the horizon very slowly got larger, and when they reached the trees two or three fresh clumps dotted the gray and white waste. That was all, and if their line cut a homestead trail, they would not know, but Waring was not often bothered to fix north and south when the sky was dark. Sometimes he steered by the clouds' drift, and sometimes perhaps he steered by instinct. The trouble was, he had had enough, and he hated to think he might not find shelter until he reached the homesteads about Glencoyne.

By and by he called Smithson to the traces, and plodded moodily in front, lowering his head when the wind got fresher. Two or three adventurous farmers had located in the Park country, but he might not see their homesteads although he was but a mile off. His shoulders ached; the queer thing was, on a long march one's shoulders got tired before one's legs, but the pain in his hip-joint had not gone. The horrible cold cramped one's muscles and broke one's pluck. At length, when they reckoned it about an hour before sunset, Smithson stopped.

"You see the bluff on our left?" he said. "I thought she might be a good spot to camp at, and I been studying her——"

"Well?" said Waring, impatiently.

Smithson did not like to be hustled, and for a moment or two his glance searched the trees.

"Fix on the west end good and hard. Can't you see a sort of square block that might be a house?"

"If there is a block, it is a house," Waring rejoined. "Come on!"

Cold and fatigue vanished. A homestead stood for warmth and man's society, and food they would not be forced to cook. Snow tossed behind the plowing sledge, and they trampled through the dusty stuff as if they had but started on the trail. When they were two hundred yards from the house Waring remarked that he saw no smoke, and he thought it queer. When they were ten yards off, they stopped. There was no smoke; the door was on the lee side, and the snow had eddied round one end and piled against the wall. Waring thought the house ominously quiet and somehow desolate.

"Looks as if they'd quit," said Smithson. "Suppose you go see if the team is at the stable?"

Waring found the team was gone, and when he got back Smithson beat on the door. A faint cry answered his knock, and, pushed by Waring, he plunged into the house. For a moment or two they stopped and looked about with dull surprise. The ladder by which one went to the roof bedroom was down; the thick side-posts were splintered and an axe lay across the wreck. The stove was cold; but for Waring's thick mittens he dared not have touched the iron, and when he mechanically shook the kettle on its top he knew the water was frozen.

A bunk with a ledge in front filled a corner behind the stove, and it looked as if all the blankets in the house, and the wagon-ropes, had been piled upon the bed. A woman awkwardly tried to push back the heap, and among the tumbled blue blankets Waring saw two children. One

began a feeble wail; the other was quiet, as if asleep, and Waring wondered whether the child was dead.

"Are you sick, ma'am?" Smithson inquired.

"I don't know," said the woman dully. "When I went out to chop wood, something hurt my back. I had to crawl to the house. Now it's not too bad——"

She awkwardly lifted her shoulders from the blankets, as if she experimented, but stopped, and her mouth went tight. For the most part, her face was colorless, but her lips, and her hands, were blue.

"You mustn't get up," said Smithson, and noted the empty wood-box. "Have you a bucksaw?"

She told him where to get a saw, and he signed Waring to bring the axe.

"You stop right in bed, ma'am. We'll soon get a fire."

Small birch and poplar logs were stacked behind the house, and Waring carried one to the saw-horse.

"I'll crosscut, and you might split the bolts. I hope the sap has dried out," he said. "The woman's half frozen; but do you think her ill?"

"Looks like lumbago," Smithson remarked. "She'd stoop to lift a log on the horse; it gets you when you bend like that, particularly when the cold is fierce. Anyhow, the kiddies are freezing. Let's get busy!"

Waring had thought himself tired, and birch is cross-grained stuff. He had no grease for the frame-saw, and he doubted if the wood had dried before it froze, but the bolts he cut fell rapidly from the horse and crashed under Smithson's axe. By and by Smithson gathered an armful of the blocks.

"Keep going," he said, and vanished.

Sparks blew from the stovepipe and a window shone. Waring thought the red shower and the cheerful glow

man's challenge to the cold and gloom; in the Northwest, one must fight Nature's destructive forces for one's life. The logs, however, were getting thin, and he might use the axe, particularly since the swing and shock harmonized with his mood. Although he was moved to pity, he was moved to savageness, and he had felt like that before. In fact, had he not, the cold on one or two marches might have conquered him. Now his blood began to run warmly, he would strike back, and snatch the woman and her brood from the murderous frost. The axe circled faster and the thin logs crashed.

After a time, Smithson dragged out the wood-box.

"Fill her up and I'll unload the sled. Seems they haven't got much to eat, and we'll use our stuff. If you like, I'll spell you, but I'm the better cook."

"Then get to it," said Waring. "I'll stay with job till dark."

They pushed the wood-box into the house, and he resumed his chopping. Now he had for a minute or two put down the axe, the cold began to bite, and his back and shoulders hurt. For all that, dusk would soon fall, and when they started in the morning they must leave a stock of wood. It looked as if they must start. Smithson was justified to be extravagant, but their supplies were nearly exhausted, and Mrs. Grant might need proper help.

At length Smithson shouted, and Waring went to the house. The stove was red, and by contrast with the plain, the little room was warm. Mrs. Grant had got up, and Waring noted that she was properly dressed; when she went to bed, she had, no doubt, put on all the clothes she could find. Although her face was pinched, the blood had crept back to her skin. A child's head stuck out from the blankets on another chair, and the little fellow's eyes were

fixed on the tall policeman by the stove. A little girl stirred the contents of a bowl and knitted her brows when the stuff splashed the hot iron.

"The children are not much the worse, ma'am, and I hope you will soon be able to get about," Waring remarked.

"Tom was sick," said Mrs. Grant. "For two or three days we nearly starved, but now I believe he's 'most all right."

"A hard cure," said Smithson. "All the same, I've known it work. Yeast-powder bread and salt pork kind of sours on a kiddie's stomach, but I guess you have to give them what you've got. Anyhow, since he has starved, you want to feed him gradual."

Waring smiled; sometimes Smithson was unconsciously humorous. Mrs. Grant gave him a puzzled glance.

"You reckon you know something about it? Well, it looks as if you can cook. Where'd you learn?"

"Sure I know, ma'am. Six of us in a Montreal tenement, mother crippled by arthritis, and the old man off all winter in the Quebec woods. I reckon I helped Sadie raise the gang."

"But you left them. The Park country is a long ways from Montreal. Where are they now?"

"Mother's gone, and Sadie's married. I guess the rest have hit the trails all over Canada. When the old man brought home a fresh wife we pulled out. Some time I'll maybe run up against one or another. But the hash looks all right, and the kiddies want their grub."

He served supper, and Waring thought he, like a frontiersman, had used to the best advantage the materials he could get. The canned beef was boiled to shreds, and he had thickened the brew with flour; the floating lumps of

rocky bread were perhaps the remnants of Mrs. Grant's stock. The stuff, at all events, was hot, and the children greedily drained their mugs. When all was gone, Smithson cogitated.

"I could melt some bacon grease and cook a biscuit in the spider; but I won't. The kiddies might want some, and I guess they have had enough. They better wait for breakfast, but you'll take some tea."

He brewed tea. Waring and the little girl washed the mugs, and then she invited him to pick her up.

"I reckon I like you, and Momma's got Tom," she said. "If you give me some tea and hold me nice, I might go to sleep."

Waring, rather awkwardly, took her in his arms. Mrs. Grant smiled, and Smithson, for the first time in five or six days, laughed.

"They go for the lookers, and there's no use in getting mad. All the same, you'll have to drink weak tea, partner."

He changed Waring's cup for another, and by and by, when the children were again in bed, Mrs. Grant told her tale.

They had thrashed a quantity of wheat, but the sum they got was small, and when her husband heard somebody who was cutting poles in the Manitoba woods wanted a teamster, he put his horses on the cars. For a month or two Mrs. Grant carried on alone, but sometimes Mrs. Lane, whose husband was in British Columbia, drove across from her homestead five miles off; and she had promised to carry her to the settlement when she needed fresh domestic stores. Her supplies and the cordwood got low, but little Tom was sick. Then she had no rig, and if

she walked across to Mrs. Lane's, she must leave the children.

In consequence, when she knew a storm brooded, their food and split wood were almost gone. She went to the log pile and started to lift a trunk. Something cracked in her back, and for ten minutes she could not get home. At dusk a blizzard broke, and, crawling from her bunk, she tried to chop the top-room ladder, but pain forced her to stop, and she could not get back to bed. For the night they camped by the red stove, and in the morning the fire burned out. The water in the kettle froze, the bread was like stone, but, in desperation, she was somehow able to get into the bunk. Then she had thought all must freeze; people did freeze, but not so soon as you might think. The queer thing was, if she was very cautious, to move hurt her less.

"I guess that's so," Smithson agreed. "If your luck is pretty good, the cramp begins to let up in a day or two. But you'll go right back, ma'am, and until we make breakfast, you'll stay where you are put."

He took her in his arms, and, helped by Waring, put her in the bunk beside the children. Afterwards he and Waring made their camp on the floor, and soon were asleep. In the morning, when the white plain began to sparkle in the sun, they took the trail.

"I reckon Mrs. Lane will be across in an hour or two," Smithson remarked. "If she's not there, we'll send Jesmond. Anyhow, you don't have to worry. As soon as we make the settlement, we'll start somebody loading up all the stuff you need."

Mrs. Grant gave them her hand.

"You're fine boys," she said.

CHAPTER XIII

ASHTON STARTS FOR WINNIPEG

DAY was breaking, and Leslie pulled a chair to the stove at the livery yard and lighted his pipe. The little, ship-lap office was not yet warm; sometimes when he got to work the ink was frozen. Behind the thin wall a bucket clanked and the stable man chanted a doleful ballad. The *Spanish Cavalier* had not long since crossed the Atlantic, and was, rather strangely, a favorite song in the prairie belt.

"The bright sunny day will soon fade away——"

A horse plunged, the bucket clanged, and the musician swore. Leslie smiled. It looked as if the freezing water had splashed into Bill's rubber boots. Sometimes Leslie wondered why he kept the fellow after the snow fell. For the most part, the commercial drummers who hired his rigs vanished from the plains in winter and returned, like the butterflies, in spring. Anyhow, Bill was satisfied with half-pay and his board, and Leslie refused to fire him because Harmon thought he ought. Harmon did not yet own the livery, but he soon might do so, and in the face of it, Leslie was not going to be parsimonious for his creditor's benefit.

He must, however, get busy. The farmers brought him harness to mend, and Pete, who generally helped him, was trapping in the northern woods. The fellow could use an awl and waxed thread better than anyone Leslie knew. But the Blackfoot were famous for curing and embroidering skins, and the boys reckoned one of Pete's ancestors

was an Indian. Inheritance was queer. If you studied up the brown horse, you could spot the stockiness he got from an English Suffolk two or three generations back.

Leslie looked up. Horses' feet beat dully, and then wheels jarred. Snow had blown across the gap where the sidewalk was cut, and the driver had hit the buried end of the boards. The wheels stopped, and Leslie went to the door. His breath floated like steam about his head, and the horses were indistinct behind a sort of fog. Ashton jumped down, and his shaggy skin coat and cap exaggerated his height and bulk. When he beat his hands by the stove his look was grim.

"I want Bill to go with me to Walpole and bring back the rig," he said. "You might keep the horses for me. I might be a week at Winnipeg, and I'll pay you when I can."

"Well, I guess I must risk it," Leslie agreed.

"There's another thing. I've got to go to Winnipeg, and I want twenty dollars."

Leslie hesitated. He knew Tom Ashton honest, and he was willing to feed his horses, but to loan him twenty dollars was, as Tom admitted, another thing.

"She's quite a lot of money, and if I obliged you, I'd be broke for a month."

"Some of us are broke for good," said Ashton, and pulled out his watch. "This watch is an English lever, the best kind that's made——"

For a moment or two he moodily studied the silver hunting watch. It was his mother's present when he was twenty-one, and for her sake he hated to let it go. Yet, although a man might owe his mother much, his wife might claim her debt.

"The horses are Harmon's and the watch is all I have

got," he went on. "For twelve months you mustn't sell it, and when I can put up the wad, I get it back."

"Sure," said Leslie, in an apologetic voice. "I don't want you to think me mean, Tom, but if I had half the money I'm waiting for, I'd be rich. Well, let's go see if I can find the sum."

Searching his cash-box, desk and pockets, he found eighteen dollars.

"There's my pile," he remarked. "Looks as if I owe you two dollars, but you're my debtor. Well, just now wheat-belt finance is kind of mixed. All owe somebody something, and when the boys do get a harvest, to straighten up will be a job for a bankers' clearing house. In the meantime, we're for the station, and your horses mustn't stand."

Six or seven hours afterwards, Ashton moodily pondered in a corner of a second-class smoking compartment on board the Toronto express. He had no sleeper ticket, but the big stove behind his compartment would be stoked at nightfall and the sum he had borrowed would not carry him to Winnipeg and back. So long as he reached the city, it was not important.

Behind the glass, the white plain rolled by rather steadily than fast, for the Toronto express's speed between the numerous water tanks was about thirty miles an hour. The rails had shrunk in the cold, and the jar of the wheels when they took the joints was loud. Sometimes a low rise's top shone yellow in the setting sun; where a ravine crossed the flats the shadows were melting blue. Ashton saw that dark would soon fall, and he pulled out a strip he had torn from a Winnipeg newspaper. He knew the paragraph by heart, but if he studied the printed words afresh, he might note some point he had missed.

For three or four minutes, however, he looked straight in front. When his wife left him, she declared there was no use in his trying to find her, and at another time she stated that if he rolled in money, she would hate the farm. Jane's habit was to talk at large, and he doubted if she was consciously satirical. Harmon's greediness was the grounds for their last dispute, but the trouble, perhaps, began before their wedding, since her ridiculous relations did not think a working farmer's son her proper husband. Ashton's folk were North Country statesmen; the hill farm was theirs, and to weigh the large strong men against the Liverpool clerks whose patent of gentility was a cheap silk hat was absurd.

Ashton had tried to indulge Jane's idiosyncrasies, but he had refused to be guided by the rules her mother used. All he wanted was to labor on his farm, and for the first few years he might have been satisfied to supply his wife with food and clothes. It looked as if he had not satisfied Jane, but his luck was bad, and she had not helped much. He did not altogether know what she had wanted. He thought her vaguely ambitious to be important, and she grumbled because they did not have coal and gas and hot-water taps. Moreover, she implied that to be industriously useful was not quite ladylike.

In consequence, they jarred, and sometimes he was sorry. Jane was not a competent housekeeper, and a man must first think about his job. If his wife cannot help, she ought, at all events, not to embarrass him. Yet for all his thought and labor, he was broke, and Jane was gone. Although he frankly thought it a forlorn hope, if he pinched and strained and sweated, he might at length redeem the farm. Jane refused to wait, and he acknowledged her logical.

When she had gone, he missed her. The homestead was bleak and lonely, and for all their disputes, he had not known another girl like Jane. A small farmer's wife had not a soft job, and sometimes when his work stopped he was tired and moody. After she went, he began to think Jane was kinder than he had known. He wanted her back, but she declared she had had enough; he doubted if she would stop at Winnipeg, and he could not search Canada, particularly when he was broke. Yet she might not get a post; Jane had not the frontierswomen's robust health, and she was not remarkably competent. He had begun to be anxious for her; and then the newspaper arrived, and he got a horrible jolt. Ashton clenched his fist and concentrated on the paragraph.

Jean Leroux, French-Canadian lumberman, crossing the bridge to Saint Boniface one evening, saw a girl steal down the bank. The Red River was not yet firmly frozen, and the current, for a short distance, had cut an open channel. A half moon was shining and the girl's speed excited Leroux's suspicion. Shouting to her to stop, he ran for the spot and was joined by brakeman Mellon, but when they plunged down the bank the girl ran across the shore ice and vanished. Leroux took the water, and, helped by Mellon, got the girl on the ice. Mellon reckoned they were in the water for three or four minutes and the thermometer marked zero.

Nobody was on the bridge and they carried her to the nearest house, where for some time they tried the methods the brakeman was taught by the railroad ambulance. He, however, imagined she was dead when they reached the house, and Dr. Willard agreed. The doctor informed the newspaper's representative that he reserved his full statement for the proper authorities. In the meantime the

police had found nobody who knew the young woman, and suggested that she was perhaps an immigrant and had been but a day or two in the city. Inspector Nasmyth supplied the following particulars——

Ashton weighed the particulars. The dead woman's height was as nearly as possible Jane's height, and the age the inspector fixed was within two years of hers. Yet the woman had grey eyes, and Jane's were hazel brown. In the sunshine one could not state their color, and they sparkled when she smiled.

Ashton dared not dwell upon it. If Jane was frozen on the Red River bank, he and Harmon had sent her there. The print was getting indistinct, and he savagely tore the cutting. For twenty-four hours the tragic tale had tormented him, but he had done with it. There was no use in his speculating; when he arrived he would know the girl a stranger.

Smoke floated across the glass, and behind the tossing cloud gray snow and dim telegraph poles drifted by. The express rolled leisurely ahead and Ashton reckoned she would soon stop at another water tank. To storm about her slowness would not help. He must wait. Sometime in the morning the crawling train would reach Winnipeg.

A shovel clanked behind the partition, and the door crashed back. A colored porter lighted the big lamp that swung gently to and fro under the roof.

"We stop at Montcalm for supper, suh," he said. "You kin take a square meal; she's not much behind schedule."

"That's something," said Ashton. "I'd begun to wonder when you go."

The colored man's splendid teeth shone and his white eyeballs rolled.

"She's got to take a drink, boss, every thirty miles; but

when we pull out for T'ronto, you can bet on our going through. My land! When number sixty starts, all they done know is, she crossed the Rockies, and they advertise for her. Fifty dollars for anybody who kin tell them where the ole train is gone."

He went off with a chuckle, and Ashton lighted his pipe. The tobacco tasted bitter and his mouth was dry, but he dared not dwell on the tragedy by the river, and he could not concentrate on the newspaper he bought from the train boy. The jolt he had got had banished sleep, and he had driven south for thirty miles when the sun was on the sparkling snow. His eyes ached and when the lamp swung, the printed lines ran together.

The whistle called, a bell tolled, and lights stole past the slowing cars. Passengers got down and vanished at a door where a woman rang a bell. In the lean years, the Canadian Pacific did not run dining-cars; the station was a meal station, and it looked as if that was all. A fire's red reflections marked the locomotive tank; and then the telegraph poles and snow melted in the dark.

Ashton walked up and down by the wheels. He had, before he started, dined for twenty-five cents at the Walpole hotel, and since he had not much appetite, had thought it an extravagance. In order to reach Winnipeg, he had pawned his watch, but he must stay for a day or two and the sum he had got would not carry him back. After all, he might find Jane had got a post and was, by contrast, prosperous. Then his search would be ridiculous, and, in a way, humiliating. Anyhow, he could not logically persuade her to rejoin him.

A biting wind blew across the snow, and to hear the conductor's "All aboard," was some relief. The bell clanged, wheels rolled, and the porter came in.

"Bimeby I fix you berth, suh. She's warmest this end. You got a sleeper ticket?"

"I haven't," said Ashton. "I don't want a berth."

The porter shrugged. He had noted the farmer's shabby skin coat; the fur was not the sort of fur generous passengers used. Soon after he went off, a commercial gentleman arrived, and, pulling out a notebook, lighted a cigar.

"Night's pretty fierce; I drove ten miles from a way-back settlement," he remarked. "When I'd paid my hotel bill and rig hire, I was five dollars down. My luck was the same at Regina and Medicine Hat. Looks as if nobody in the whole bum country had got fifty cents, but I dassen't go home with a nearly-clean order book, and I'll try to wake up Brandon. The farmers have all gone bust, I guess?"

"Something like that," said Ashton. "We carry the storekeepers, and when our harvest's good the load is a strong man's load. In fact, since ours is the West's main industry, we might claim to carry the merchant importers, the railroad, and the banks. I don't know if we are shabby, but to think they have sometimes got to be frugal doesn't hurt us much."

"Everybody has to be frugal," the drummer rejoined. "My home's Toronto, but, like you, I'm betting on the next crop, and if you go down, I reckon I must quit."

"The tide will turn," said Ashton moodily. "The drawback is, we don't know when, and it might be too late to float us off the rocks. All the same, if summer is early and the June rains are good, and the fall is warm, useful money will flow into the prairie towns."

"Then, I surely wish you luck. The boys are a stubborn lot, and anyhow you're my customers. Take a cigar,

and I'll tell you a better one than you have heard for the last six months."

The tale was humorous, and the fellow's repertory was long, but Ashton indulged him, and was sorry when he went off to his berth. The compartment got colder, but when the passengers had gone to bed he must not prowl about the cars. At length, the porter looked in.

"You there, suh? Come on. I find you a warmer spot, where you don' want no ticket."

He gave Ashton an old rug in the stove compartment, and indicated a tool-box. The wall supported Ashton's back, and he stretched his legs to the grateful warmth by the stove's register. Sometimes he nodded, but he did not sleep, for when his control got slack his brain pictured Leroux and the brakeman carrying their dripping load up the Red River bank.

Wheels rolled and the draught throbbed in the stove. Sometimes lights shone across the snow, the cars stopped, and he heard the locomotive pump. At one quiet station he braced up and went to the vestibule door. A short street went back from the other that fronted the rails, and he knew the corner hotel. Portage-la-prairie, and he reckoned the time about six o'clock. Ashton began to unfasten his coat, but stopped with a dreary laugh; there was no use in his looking for his watch, and when day broke the express ought to be in Winnipeg. He went back to the stove, and when the cars rolled into the wooden station at the end of Main Street he was asleep.

CHAPTER XIV

ASHTON PURSUES HIS SEARCH

THE Winnipeg city police officer looked up from the portrait in his hand. His business was to study men, and he thought the large, brown-skinned farmer a good example of the sober British type. The young fellow had obviously borne some strain, but his firm mouth and fixed glance indicated control. Moreover, he admitted his wife had left him, and since the statement was, no doubt, humiliating, the inspector liked his frankness.

"This is not the young woman Leroux pulled out of the river," he said.

Ashton's hands shook and the blood leaped to his skin.

"You are satisfied? I cannot risk the smallest doubt. Ought I not to see her?"

"Not at all. We know now who she is. A stranger to the city, dismissed from a post she had held for two or three weeks. Her companions at the store are certain."

Ashton got up. He must thank the officer, and when he was alone try to command the emotion that came near carrying him away. The other told him to wait, and for a moment or two studied the portrait. Ashton had stated it was four years old, and on the plains the girl perhaps had lost something of her youthful freshness. The inspector thought her attractive, but hardly the sort to conquer the drawbacks a western farmer's wife must meet. She was rather the sort one tried to indulge. Her prettiness was delicate; fragile perhaps, because one felt where

the shocks were rude she might be broken. All the same, one got a hint of petulant obstinacy. Logical firmness was another thing. In some circumstances, Mrs. Ashton might be rash. The officer gave her husband the photograph.

"In the Old Country, you have public institutions and societies that help people whose luck is bad. So far, they are not numerous in Canada, and our folk must stand on their own feet. Then, just now competition for such jobs as are going at Winnipeg is pretty keen. You must find Mrs. Ashton as soon as possible and take her back with you."

"It's pretty obvious," said Ashton. "The trouble is, I don't know where to begin."

The officer said a church guild sometimes advised friendless strangers, and gave him a clergyman's name. He himself was willing to order a few inquiries, but one could not altogether trust a patrolman's discretion, and he imagined Ashton saw that some must be used. Ashton agreed, and, thanking the other, went off and asked for a workman's hotel.

The hotel was cheap and bleak. In the hall the radiator pipes were under the large windows, and moody searchers for employment occupied the long row of chairs and supported their feet on the ledge. From the sidewalk one saw broken long boots and battered rubbers, foreshortened, uncouthly posed bodies, and lined faces. Ashton found a chair unoccupied and joined the dreary group. After the suspense, a reaction had begun and his brain was dull. He knew all it was important for him to know. The girl who had frozen on the river bank was not Jane.

Bodily fatigue had something to do with his languid-

ness. He had not bothered about supper, and in order to reach the police office soon, he had gone without breakfast. Now he must wait for dinner at about twelve o'clock. He might find a little foreign delicatessen among the old-clothes shacks by the station, but he was not going out. The hall, although it smelled rankly, was not cold, and the faces of the people on the sidewalk were pinched and blue. Ashton pulled out his pipe.

He must brace up and weigh things. Jane could not have much money, and poverty had perhaps accounted for the other girl's plunge. She might not be at Winnipeg, although since railway tickets were expensive, he reckoned she would not move unless she was forced. Anyhow, he must search the city; and then he supposed he must look for work. Winnipeg was not large, but his money would soon be gone, and he must pay Leslie for feeding his horses.

Two young women crossed the street. One walked like Jane, and Ashton's heart beat, but when she turned as she got onto the sidewalk, he saw she was a stranger. For a time he watched the foot passengers, but they began to be indistinct, and his head sank towards his chest. He ought to pull his feet from the window ledge, but at length he was happily languid. His chair crashed, people laughed, and he found himself, badly jolted, on the floor.

After dinner he went to his room. One must squeeze between the wall and the narrow bed, but he smelled a hot pipe somewhere about, and the blankets were thick. Ashton pulled off his coat and boots and was soon asleep. In the morning he looked up the clergyman, who stated that his women's guild received strangers and immigrants at their evening club. He engaged to make inquiries, but Ashton himself began to search. If Jane had got a post,

he reckoned the post was at a store, and there were not yet many stores at Winnipeg.

None had engaged Mrs. Ashton, and she had not registered at the employment agencies, where you paid a dollar, and they sent you to people who needed help. She, however, might not have used her proper name, and Tom, beginning his round again, in order to study the saleswomen, asked for goods he hoped they did not have and sometimes bought a small article. He dared not show the floorwalkers the portrait he carried; if Jane had got a post, she might refuse to go back to the farm, and his informing people that she had run away from her husband would not help their reunion.

Tom did not find a clue, but his money melted and his horses were running up a bill at the Glencoyne livery. In consequence he began a fresh search, for any sort of job that would help him buy a railroad ticket. Other searchers, however, were numerous, but jobs were not, and one evening he consulted moodily with a battered veteran at the hotel. Ingram's clothes, like Ashton's were shabby, and he carried scars he had got in fights with savage Nature and the autocratic bosses of construction gangs.

"Nothing's doing in this dead town," he said. "I have a pal at a Kootenay mine, and he reckons, if I came along, they would treat me right."

"Kootenay's a thousand miles off," Ashton remarked. "Are you going by Pullman?"

"If it was summer, I might go underneath. Since she's freezing pretty fierce, I guess I'll try a freight-car."

"But the brakemen would throw you off."

"They might," Ingram agreed. "So long as she wasn't going very fast and the snow was soft, I'd take a chance."

Besides, they wouldn't find me until she stopped, and I'd beat it to the Rockies, gradual and by degrees."

For a broken man, in winter, Ashton thought the excursion something of an exploit. So far as he knew, there was nowhere on the long road any institution from which a destitute stranger could claim bed and food.

"My home's in Assiniboia, and if you wanted a partner, I might risk it," he said. "We might, at all events, make Brandon before we froze."

"Depends on the car," said Ingram. "I've got a blanket in my turkey, and maybe I could hook another from my room. Soon as the Pacific express has pulled out they get busy with the west-bound freight, and some nights Ogilvies send off a car of flour. If you are around when they're coupling up, we might steal on board."

Ashton agreed to try it, and about eleven o'clock they stumbled across the rails in the snowy yard. Ingram was rather embarrassed by his blankets and turkey bag; Ashton carried a basket of food he had bought at a delicatessen. The night was dark and a biting wind swept the yard, but not far in front the car's black tops cut the silver blaze from the yard-engine's lamps behind the train. At the other end of the long row, the freight locomotive flung a dazzling beam half a mile along the track.

Ingram stubbed his foot against a rail, dropped his load, and swore. Ashton stopped. He saw nobody and steam blew noisily from the yard-engine's valves. So far, their luck was good, but lanterns twinkled by the crossing switches, Ingram groped about for something he had dropped, and it looked as if all was ready for the train to start.

"Come on!" said Ashton. "I have got your blasted blanket."

When they were six or seven yards off, the locomotive snorted and the couplings strained. Wheels began to roll, and with a daunting noise the dark cars lurched ahead. For some time the train had waited, and iron frames, axle journals, and bearing boxes had shrunk in the frost.

"She's not going yet," said Ingram. "Engineer's drying out his cylinders and trying if all is right; I reckon he's 'most scared to start her up. All the same, they'll give him the clear road in a minute or two, and we got to find our car."

The wheels jarred and stopped, and, stumbling across the ties, they followed the row of cars. The doors were jammed fast, and some were sealed, but at length Ingram seized Ashton's arm.

"*Road delivery.* Here's our lot," he gasped. "If they dump some stuff at Portage, our ride will be short, but she won't be fastened up, and we'll trust our luck."

They pushed back the heavy sliding-door, and Ingram put his bag on board. Then, standing in the gap, he turned his head.

"Blast that yard loco! She's for the next track. Give me the basket and blanket. And get up."

Silver light flashed along the train, and the dazzling beam beat into Ashton's eyes. He could not see the blanket, but he knew himself conspicuous in the show, and while he blindly groped about, the freight locomotive snorted and a bell began to toll. He found the articles, and jumping for the car threw them to Ingram. He thought the fellow shouted, but jarring iron and jolting wheels drowned his voice. Then the yard engine rolled by and all was dark.

The train had begun to move and he must get up. When he tried for a hold on the car floor his hand was

numb. If he could get a support for his foot, he might shove up his body, but he was forced to run. Then somebody seized him and he and the other crashed in the snow.

The cars lurched noisily ahead, and for a few crowded moments Ashton was occupied. He was up first, and imagined the railroad man had had enough, for he seemed to concentrate on getting his breath. Ashton admitted the fellow must carry out his orders, but since he had lost his wife and lost his farm to let himself go was some relief. For a moment or two he waited, and heard the laboring freight-train take the road.

"Shout, if you like, but you'll be sorry before your mates arrive," he said.

The railroad man perhaps reflected that the train was gone. Ashton rather thought he had not seen Ingram climb to the door. At all events, he said nothing and went off across the rails. Ashton went the other way. Ingram was on board the train and he had the food Tom had bought. If he were humorous, he might see the joke. He, however, must get back to the hotel, and in the morning resume his search for a job.

Two or three days went; and then an employment agent told him a few hefty men were wanted at the Ogilvie mills, and in the dark, cold morning he joined the forlorn crowd. A foreman beckoned three or four, and stopped for a moment while his glance searched the row.

"You!" he said. "No; stand back, the short man. I want the big fellow in the old skin coat."

Ashton's heart beat. He was engaged and the pay was good, but in the evening to pull on his coat bothered him. On a truck, you could, without much effort, move a hundred-and-forty pound bag of flour. To build up the bags in neat high tiers was another thing, and the large sacks

weighed two-hundred and eighty pounds. Moreover, when he began to calculate, he doubted if the surplus after he had met the hotel bill would pay for his horses' board. Yet, if he held on at Winnipeg, he might find out something about Jane.

He did find a clue. A young fellow at the mill asked him to his house, and he went one Sunday to the little clapboard shack in a new avenue cut through the willow swale between Main Street and the river. His host's sister's friends were clerks and saleswomen, and Tom, telling the girl all he thought it useful for her to know, asked her help. She took Jane's portrait and stated that if he came back in three or four days, she might have some news for him.

Ashton went and was presented to another girl, with whom Jane was for a time employed at a cheap store. The house was a hard house, and the girl thought a floorwalker had from the beginning picked on Mrs. Ellory. She herself did not like the man, and soon after Mrs. Ellory left she quit. Tom nodded. He had interviewed the floorwalker, but he had asked for Mrs. Ashton. Ellory was Jane's mother's name.

Mrs. Ellory was fired, the girl resumed. Some days you might think you were *hoodooed*, because all went wrong, and one afternoon she was forced to let go three or four customers whom she could not satisfy. Then a hard-faced dame blew in and wanted some strings. Mrs. Ellory asked if she meant laces, and the dame got mad.

"The fool girl can't talk English, but she don't get fresh with me," she said to the floorwalker. "My trade's worth eight dollars a week and I expect to be treated civil."

On the Saturday evening Ashton looked up the fellow.

The store was crowded, and the floorwalker stalked about importantly. Tom stopped him and pulled out the photograph.

"After all, Mrs. Ellory was in your department."

"That's so," agreed the other. "You asked for Mrs. Ashton."

"She was fired," said Tom. "At the middle of the week. Did she get her pay?"

"If she went to the office at the proper time, I reckon she would get it. What's it got to do with you?"

"She is my wife. I want to know one or two other things. For example, if she asked for a post at Brandon, I suppose the storekeeper would write to you. Did somebody write? And what did you reply?"

"If I was asked, I'd state she was no good," said the other aggressively. "Anyhow, you can't block the traffic. Inquire at the office."

The office was at the other end of the large crowded floor. When Ashton went in, a tall man signed him to wait, and for a minute or two gave some orders to a clerk. Then the floorwalker arrived.

"Mr. Ashton is inquiring about his wife. You might remember the thin English girl we fired?"

"Why, I think so. Got rattled, didn't she?" the storekeeper agreed, and turned to Ashton. "We do not run a public information bureau, particularly on Saturday evening. Come back when nothing's doing."

"I have got to know if you have had an inquiry about Mrs. Ellory from a storekeeper in another town——"

A clerk pushed into the office, and the proprietor frowned.

"Come back next week," he said, and signed the floorwalker. "Show him out!"

"Get a move on," said the other and pushed Tom. "You can't hold up business on Saturday evening, and you ought to have kept your wife when you had her——"

He went backwards, down two or three steps, and brought up against a showcase. Tom on his way to the store had pondered some remarks upon the sweating of defenseless young women, but his talents for speech were not remarkable, and his blood was fired. While the farmers pinched and strained, the merchants got rich. They had taken from him his wife and all that was his. If he could but knock out the brute who had bullied Jane, he was willing to go to jail.

The fellow recovered sooner than Tom had thought. Before he started for the cities, he had used the axe at a small bush farm. They grappled and fell against a revolving dress-stand. The stand broke and cheap blanket coats were scattered about the boards. Tom and his antagonist trampled in the stuff, women cried out, and a telephone began to ring, but when telephones were first installed at Winnipeg, a bell might ring for long before the exchange replied.

Tom took and gave some awkward knocks. Speed was important, because unless he beat up the other soon the police might arrive. If they were left alone for five minutes, he reckoned the floorwalker would not stalk about the boards on Monday morning. A hefty young clerk and a salesman went to the other's help. Tom, as far as possible, stuck to his man, but he was knocked and hustled back, and the group's advance to the door was marked by overturned clothes-stands, broken card-boxes, scattered fur gloves, and cakes of soap. Women, pushing back from the danger line, began to laugh; brown-skinned men cheered on the combatants. In the Canadian West pistols

were not worn, but sometimes primitive citizens used their fists and boots.

Had Ashton called for help, his sympathizers might have wrecked the store. Tom, however, was sternly preoccupied by his efforts to punish his chief antagonist. Sometimes he thought he planted his fist where a knock would hurt, but the group forced him back, and at length, plunging across the sidewalk, he sat down in the snow.

His old coat had torn from the buttons, his head swam, and he could not see distinctly. All the same, he imagined the floorwalker was not in first-class trim, and, getting on his feet, he went off as fast as possible.

On Monday he resumed his labors at the mill. The police did not disturb him and for a week he carried on. Then the foreman stated that the extra men were no longer required, and since he had got no fresh news of Jane he started for Glencoyne.

CHAPTER XV

RUTH TAKES A HOLIDAY

AT GLENCOYNE Christmas Eve was ominously dark and calm. Parked wagons and two or three lighter rigs blocked Leslie's yard; the hotel and poolroom windows shone. Bachelor farmers whose crops had not been frozen had left their lonely homesteads for the settlement hotel and a feast they themselves would not be forced to cook. Others, less fortunate, needed supplies, and had fronted the long excursion in order to enjoy some human society on Christmas Eve. None dared be extravagant, but if one had sold one's wheat, one might give a friend a cigar and bet two bits on a game at the poolroom.

At the livery yard, Latimer, by the light of a tubular lantern, harnessed his team. He had been forced to pull off his mittens, and when he touched a steel buckle or clevis he knew he ran some risk, but so long as his fingers were enclosed in a fur-lined bag, he could not fasten the obstinate straps. On Christmas Eve Bob dined with the Hopes, and the prairie rules allowed a guest to provide some part of the feast. He had asked Mrs. Olsen to advise him, and he was going to the store for Ruth, whom Mrs. Hope had invited for the holiday. A few yards off, Sergeant McBride got on his horse.

"The night's pit-dark," he said. "It's that still ye might hear a trotting horse a mile away. The Northwest is not a quiate country, Mr. Latimer."

"Then, the calm bothers you, Sergeant?"

"If I was convoying a lady to Mistress Hope's, I would start. An' if she was not ready, I would firmly leave her at the store."

"Sometimes firmness is hard," said Bob. "I rather doubt yours, thirty years since, when you were a romantic youth in County Londonderry. Or was it Tyrone?"

"In them days a young fellow of my station did not drive a rig. When I tuk the road, I went on my feet, and if it was a high holiday, my shoes was in my hand. But the girl is English and tender, and a storm is calling in the calm. Well, before I start, I'll give the boys who are going home the useful word."

"Goodnight and a jolly Christmas, Sergeant," Bob replied.

McBride pushed his horse across the street and stopped a group by the poolroom door. The beam from the windows touched his easily posed figure and the steaming horse. In the dark and cold, voices carried, and Bob heard scraps of banter and a laugh. Then the horse's feet beat the snow and three or four young fellows drifted across the yard.

"I don't know but he's right, and I'm for the lonesome trail," said one.

"For a policeman, old Mack's a good sort. Anyhow, we might get worse," another remarked.

Bob beat his hands and led his horses to the Olsen store. He was not forced to wait for Ruth, and when he had picked up some stuff he had ordered she came from the back room and gave him a sparkling smile. Bob reflected that since she went to the store she had not taken a holiday, and to visit with her friends, no doubt, accounted for her joyous look. He liked her neat blanket coat, and he imagined blanket coats were the recent

fashion for winter sports at Montreal, but for a drive across the bleak high plain furs were the proper dress. They, however, were expensive, and Ruth's pay was small. Well, he had brought a bundle of hay and his thick wagon-robe.

Mrs. Olsen rested her large, thin hands on the counter and studied the girl. Nobody else was in the store, and Bob sensed a touch of dreariness in Minna's look. Her braced arms supported her slack body, and one knew her old and tired.

"The *tuque* mus' be low, over the ear, and you fix the mitten cuff before you start. So. It is better now. You go to the young peoples and that is right. To be young and lonely is not good. But I have somethings for you. In the morning, you see what you have got, and maybe you like it."

She pushed a parcel into the girl's hands. Ruth, with a swift, impulsive movement, turned and kissed her. When they went down the steps she said to Bob:

"She's a dear old thing, and I feel I am rather a selfish pig. Still, sometimes to play up is harder than one thinks. Suppose I had stopped, and been sorry?"

"I expect Minna would not have known," said Bob. "I ought, perhaps, to declare you wouldn't be sorry, but one likes to be accurate, and we are flesh and blood. Anyhow, the team mustn't stand. Let's push off."

He helped Ruth on board, pulled the shabby robe round her, and packed hay about her boots. She noted that he was not awkward, and since a young man had thought for her comfort some time had gone. As a rule, Bob Latimer's talk was carelessly humorous, but all he did was competently done. Moreover, he had harvested a wheat crop when others had not.

The horses plunged ahead, and when the lights from the store and hotel faded, one could not see their backs. Bob, swaying on the spring seat, was hardly distinguishable, and the dark in front was like a wall. Ruth wondered how he kept the trail, but if the team took the loose snow, the throb of drumming hoofs might be duller.

"Adam's asking me across was a happy thought," he said. "Last Christmas Bellinda helped me celebrate the feast; we loafed by the stove and brewed green tea. A quart perhaps; I don't know if it's lucky, but the stuff does not go down like beer. I dare say your last Christmas, so to speak, was different. A jolly house party: mistletoe and red berries on the walls. In the morning you perhaps walked to church. Wet roads and a west wind blowing across green fields. In parts, the picture's traditional; but when I think about Christmas in England, I refuse to picture snow."

"It was not at all like that," said Ruth. "The house was in a northern town, and sooty fog crawled about the streets. The large old-fashioned rooms were as cold as Canada, and the others went to the party—I, like Cinderella, was allowed to stop at home. Well, if I were given a first-class ticket, I would not go back. And I think you declare the frontiersman's habit is to look in front."

"That is so," Bob agreed. "Look in front, trust your luck, and shove ahead. Canada's the land of promise, and if you don't hit the spot you aim for, you may find the spot you reach all right."

He stopped. Horses' feet beat the trampled snow, and a large object loomed in the dark. As a rule, two horses hauled a rig, but the noise seemed to indicate some more, and Bob swung his team from the trail. The other driver stopped and it looked as if he carried a jolly group.

"Kin you tole me, stranger, when we'll make Glen-coyne?" said one. "Jake don't know where she is, and since sundown we've ranged the lonesome plain."

"If he drives straight, ten minutes should see you out."

"Why, it's Bob!" shouted another. "Turn her round and join up. We're for the settlement to get on a jag."

"I think not. Since Bellinda left me I've gone soberly. But do you reckon you'll need an extra team to carry you home?"

"We might," the first replied, and another laughed.

"*Get a horse.* Since Bill's rig went through the bridge at Doolan's we got four. Two in front, and two behind; if the settlement's not where Jake calculates, we can reverse her. Well, if you're not coming, we got to make the Murchison House before we freeze."

Bob let his team go, and the rattling wheels drowned a farewell joke. The other wagon vanished, and Ruth was vaguely daunted by the loneliness and the dark. For a time Bob was quiet, and she thought he pondered, but by and by he said:

"The boys are entitled to a modest jag, and for them to be jolly implies some pluck. Only one sold some wheat. But I suppose you are keen about visiting with Mrs. Hope?"

"Of course," said Ruth. "Martha expects me. But why do you inquire?"

"I begin to think we ought to turn. After we leave the main fork the trail gets faint, and if we did not hit Faulder's bluff, it might be awkward. Then I feel a storm is brewing."

"Oh, please!" said Ruth. "If I was not your passenger, I expect you would not go back. Well, I am willing to risk it, and I will not make you accountable."

Bob's habit, as he had boasted, was to trust his luck. He ought, perhaps, to be firm, but, after all, the storm might not break for an hour or two, and if Ruth were resolved, he might indulge her. All the same, he drove fast, and imagined the horses were willing. They were going home, but birds and animals sense a brooding storm. After a time, he stopped the team and gave Ruth the reins.

"Unless I shout, you mustn't move. I reckon we are at Crane Lake, and I must feel for the trail fork."

Jumping down, he vanished in the dark. For a few moments Ruth heard his steps in the snow; and then she felt as if he were altogether gone. She could drive a single horse and might drive a pair; but so long as she did not know where she went there was no use in starting. The loneliness began to daunt her, but she refused to shout and acknowledge herself afraid. In the meantime, the horses tossed their heads and stamped the snow. They hated to stand, and to hold them was some relief. At length Bob called, and when she cautiously drove ahead, climbed on board.

"I have spotted the trail, and if we can hit the bluff, to make Hope's oughtn't to bother us," he said. "If Adam can squeeze my team into his stable, I'll stop for the night."

Ruth noted that he drove as fast as possible. She saw nothing to indicate the line he ought to take, but it did not look as if he hesitated. The darkness was perhaps not quite so thick, and she sensed a sort of movement in the air. Her feet, for all the straw, were horribly cold, and her hands under the thick robe got numb. A little powdery snow stung her skin, and stopped. Sometimes she heard a queer sighing noise, as if the frozen earth

breathed. At length she rather felt than saw that something broke the moving air's slow current, and Bob stretched out his arm.

"Faulder's bluff," he said, and turned his head.

The sighing noise was louder; Ruth thought it like the noise a breeze makes in its advance across a calm sea. Then, in the bluff she could hardly distinguish, branches tossed.

"Not long since, I wanted to take you back to Glen-coyne," Bob resumed.

"That is so," said Ruth. "I do not know if you were remarkably kind."

"I'm sorry I wasn't firm. Now you are going to the Cave—there's my apology!"

Dry branches groaned and rattled, and Ruth heard a roar like the roar of a train. Snow as fine as dust stung her skin, and a blinding white fog blew past the team.

"If I refuse, you cannot carry me off. Besides, if you can reach your house, you can reach Mrs. Hope's."

Bob let the horses go. "I can't find Hope's. The team might find the Cave, and we must let them try."

Ruth's emotions were mixed and baffling, but the storm's fury dominated all. If she tried to dispute, the wind would drown her voice, and in the horrible cold her brain was dull. For a minute or two, the roaring wood to some extent sheltered the rig; and then, when the gale raged across the open flats, Bob pushed her from the spring seat.

"Get down," he shouted. "Down in the wagon body, on this side."

Ruth went down, rather like a sack, for when she tried to move she felt as if her numbed limbs were powerless. She was partly under the cross-board seat, between the

rig's low side and Bob's legs. She felt him shuffle the hay about her, and that was all she really knew because the wagon-robe went over her head.

Bob braced himself strongly against the gale. Now his passenger was fixed, which was perhaps the proper word, he must try to calculate. To do so was hard, but he must not get rattled. He thought the wind had blown more or less squarely across the trees, and he knew the compass line from the bluff to his house. That was something, because there was no use in his bothering about the trail. He must, as far as possible, keep the gale on his right shoulder; on the darkest night, a plainsman and a sailor knows from where the wind blows. Besides, the Butte was a pretty large object, and the team was going home. Anyhow, he must persuade himself that they would make it. He mustn't admit he doubted.

He reckoned they went straight. The wind was where it was ten minutes since. He felt its oblique impact on his back and the numbing flesh between his coat collar and his fur cap. So long as he did feel the tingling pain, he need not bother. All he saw was a sort of tossing fog. The snow did not fall in flakes, and as a rule on the high plains the snowfall is light. Bob thought some part of the powdery stuff was stripped from the frozen turf, as spindrift is torn from the sea, and dust swept from a road. Anyhow it clogged his nostrils and beat into his eyes. And its cold was insupportable. Engineers superheated steam; in Canada and in Russia, snow perhaps superfroze.

They kept going. A horse's instinct is to turn his hind-quarters squarely to a gale, but since Bob's did not, he hoped they knew where they went. He speculated dully about his passenger. His voice would not pierce the turmoil, and he hesitated to push her with his boot. Then,

for her sake and his, he must try to concentrate on the feel of the reins. He must know if the team hesitated, and which way they pulled.

At all events, they were not embarrassed by snow on the ground. The stuff could not rest, and at some spots he thought the hard turf was bare. If he could keep his line and endure the cold, they might get home, but he could not endure for long. Sometimes an exhausted team carried home their frozen driver.

Bob refused to dwell on it. No hope was perhaps altogether a forlorn hope, and he must fight for his passenger; but when one was battered and freezing and blinded, one did not philosophize. One set one's mouth and mechanically held on. The Butte could not be far off, and when they got there the horses would know, if he did not. He dared not think they might blunder past.

Time went. His hands were clamped like claws on the reins, and since he could not feel with his fingers, he must trust the strain on his arms; his legs below the knee were like wooden props. The team plunged along, and at length Bob imagined they went faster. Something seemed to rise between him and the wind; the horses stopped, and his heart beat with triumph. Somehow they had made it! They had cheated the storm!

Pulling Ruth to her feet, Bob jumped down, and fell against the wheel. When he helped Ruth she was a dead weight in his cramped arms, and he was forced to steady her when her feet touched the ground. The team went to the stable, and, throwing back the door, he pushed her in and savagely began to loose the harness. The snow buffeted him, his fingers were like rigid claws, and he could not see the straps. Yet the horses must not freeze,

and if he were willing to cut the harness, he could not draw a knife.

Bob did not move all the stuff, but he loosed the animals from the wagon, and they pushed after him to their stalls, where he slipped their bits and threw some corn and chop in the mangers. If he could get back, he would give them a drink. Then, in the dark, he called for Ruth. She said nothing, and when he fastened the door he hardly dared let her go. Lurching about like a drunken man, he carried her twenty yards to the house, and indulged another triumphant thrill. The Cave was not altogether cold, and a fire yet burned in the stove.

CHAPTER XVI

CHRISTMAS UNDERGROUND

RUTH'S head swam and water drained from her eyes. The room was not warm, but after the cold on the plain a reaction had begun, and, letting herself go slack, she dully endured the tingling pains and dizziness. Her blanket coat was clean; she had thought the snow would stick to the woolly material, but Bob had pulled the wagon-robe over her head, and when they came in she rather thought he had beaten her clothes with his large mittens. Snow was scattered across the boards, and had not begun to melt.

In the meantime Bob, swiftly and purposefully, plunged about. The stove irons rattled and he tossed cordwood into its shining mouth; Ruth heard the blocks snap and the draught roar in the pipe. He shook the kettle, and his smile implied that to hear water splash was some satisfaction. Then he turned the lamp flame higher, and Ruth shut her swimming eyes.

Her foot was gently lifted, and she saw Bob pull off her boot. Ruth imagined she herself ought to have done so, but she had hesitated, and her hands were numb. Bob removed her boots; and then, when it looked as if he were going to remove her stockings, she firmly stopped him. He gave her an apologetic smile, and put two long deer-skin moccasins near the hot iron.

"When you are in England, I expect the proper thing is to pretend you use Queen Victoria's rules," he said. "All the same, at Windsor one doesn't get frozen feet, and

to some extent, in Canada we use common sense. Anyhow, you must pinch your feet, and if you find a spot that doesn't hurt, I will operate. I'm not an expert masseur, but I daresay I can start the blood."

Ruth had thought herself fastidious, but when a blizzard raged one must not be prudish, and it did not look as if her objections would carry much weight. She carried out his orders and by and by said:

"I cannot find a spot where feeling is altogether gone."

"That's all right," said Bob. "For a minute or two, go on rubbing, and then push your feet into the moccasins. They were made in the North by an Indian squaw; they're soft as silk, and so long as they're dry, you can't freeze in them. You see, for the next twelve hours all that's important is to keep warm, and since there's no liquor in the Cave, I'll brew some coffee."

For a few minutes he was occupied, and Ruth watched him languidly. Her dizziness was going, and her feet were no longer numb, but in the meantime she could not altogether brace up. She thought Bob pondered, and sometimes he turned his head as if he listened. All Ruth heard was a confused uproar, in which the growling bass and high treble notes queerly harmonized. She had heard something like it when the Dominion liner was hove to in an Atlantic storm. Bob brewed the coffee and weighed the large kettle.

"I shoved the team in the stable, and they did not get a drink," he said. "I might run across with water for some gruel, and pull off the gear I left hanging about their heads."

"The stable is twenty yards off," Ruth remarked.

She saw he hesitated, and she frankly hoped he would not go. Bob occupied himself with the kettle and a bucket,

and then seized his fur cap and mittens; he had not pulled off his skin coat.

"After all, they brought us home, and I mightn't get across at daybreak," he said. "Please stand behind the door."

A white cloud blew into the kitchen, and Ruth shivered in the awful cold. The bucket clanked, and then all other sound was drowned by the gale's turmoil. Bracing herself against the door, she gasped and strained; the lamp's flame leaped up and went out. Bob perhaps helped on the other side, for the door shut and she was alone in the dark.

Leaning against the post, she fought for calm. She mustn't allow panic to carry her away, but when the door was open she was altogether daunted by the storm's mad rage. She must use control. The stable was twenty yards from the house, and unless she got a light, Bob might not find his way back. Perhaps it was strange, but so long as he was about, she was not much afraid. She knew where he had put the matches, but she waited; the lamp would yet be hot and she must not break the glass. She got a light, and to some extent was comforted, but her heart beat and her hands shook. Bob, for his horses' sake, had fronted the gale, and she thought he knew he ran some risk. Then, for her sake, he ought not to have gone.

Ruth admitted she was selfish, and not altogether logical. Bob, like her, was but flesh and blood. All he could do was to load the stove, which she herself could do. Yet, before he went, she had felt they were safe. His humorous calm was soothing; somehow one trusted Latimer. Well, she must keep the coffee hot, and when he arrived pretend she was not disturbed.

Ten minutes went, and all she heard was the wind and

the queer hissing shock of the snow against the double glass. A white track crept across the boards in front of the door, but she refused to move the thick sandbag that had covered the joint. She must not shut out her host. She went to the window and saw nothing, but the illusion that she was on board ship returned. When the *Sarnia* labored in the gale, one felt her iron plates strain and throb. All the same, she was less afraid in the Atlantic storm. There was no use in pretending. Her host was her defense, and he perhaps fought the blinding snow.

The door cracked, and she jumped for the fastening. If it were but the wind and the lamp blew out, she might not be able to push back the door, but Bob must not wait. The lamp flared, and he plunged in, turned, and flung himself against the door. Ruth helped, the lamp's flame steadied, and the horrible turmoil stopped. Bob dragged the sandbag to the joint and leaned against the wall. In his skin coat and cap, he was as uncouth and bulky as a polar bear; his face was pinched and blue. By and by he shook himself and the dry snow fell in a white heap.

"The cold is pretty fierce," he gasped.

"I suppose a frontiersman mustn't exaggerate," said Ruth. "The cold is horrible, awful, frightening—I don't know the proper word, but it is not the Canadian *pretty fierce*."

"One's first blizzard is rather alarming," Bob agreed. "I got back as soon as possible. I thought you, so to speak, might be lonely."

"I was *scared stiff*," said Ruth. "I don't know if it's good Canadian, but it's true. To see you plunge in was some relief."

"Oh, well," said Bob with a twinkle, "one rather likes to feel somebody is happier when one is about, but the cir-

cumstances perhaps accounted for much. However, since we are here for the night, I'll go to my favorite spot."

He pushed a tool-box against the wall in a corner, and sat down. Ruth's chair was on the other side, and the large stove was between them and the window and door. Ruth gave him some coffee and told him to smoke if he liked.

"Although I am your guest, you did not invite me, and I mustn't embarrass you," she remarked.

Bob lighted his pipe and watched the smoke toss about.

"Looks, and feels, as if a draught was blowing. All the same, I think our luck is good because we're safely under the solid earth. I've known a blizzard scatter a clap-board shack across the plain, but it cannot uproot the Butte. Then you were rather glad to see me back, and sometimes Bellinda was not. He's a good sort, but when you have, every day for two or three years, faced the same companion at breakfast and supper, you begin to long for somebody fresh."

"Yes," said Ruth in a thoughtful voice, "I suppose one might. But did you and Mr. Lucy dispute?"

"Not, so to speak, dispute. When he was cook, I've known him look up and address me like this: 'If you talk about the blasted gophers, I'll fling a plate at you.' Bellinda was a pretty good shot, and I replied that I liked the flavor."

"But what had the gophers to do with his cookery?"

"They ate the wheat, and when they tried to get a drink, drowned themselves in our well. Sometimes in the morning I have fished out——"

"I'd sooner not know," Ruth said firmly. "When you went to feed the horses, were you not afraid you mightn't find the stable?"

"One tries to be modest, and it was less awkward than you might think. The stable is twenty-two yards off, and, like the house, at the bottom of the hill. In consequence, when I began to go uphill I stopped, and when I had gone a few yards on flat ground I turned half-right and steered back obliquely. All the same, to see the track I made might be interesting."

Ruth smiled. Since her host meant to be carefully humorous, she must play up.

"You kept last Christmas at the Cave?" she said.

"Bellinda rather spoiled the festival," said Bob. "He reckoned he could cook a plum pudding. I bet he could not, and we squandered a dollar on the experiment. When Bellinda is resolved, one indulges him. He spent a happy hour, picking stones from raisins and dropping tobacco in the dough."

"Was the pudding a success?"

"For the greater part of Christmas afternoon we disputed the point. I claimed a pudding ought not to *run* out of the bag; he declared it was eatable, because he had eaten the lot, and I might go to Montreal for the dollar he had bet. Since I went to sleep, I don't know if he paid for his obstinacy."

Ruth mused. Although Bob joked about it, the picture moved her. She knew him her sort, and in England he and his partner were, no doubt, indulged. By contrast, their Canadian Christmas feast was bleak. Yet he did not grumble. When Bob fronted an obstacle, she thought his habit was to joke.

"But now Mr. Lucy's gone, I expect you are sorry?" she said.

"That is so; I wish he were back. Still, when you think

about it, a bachelor's life has some advantages. You can get rid of a partner, but your wife is yours for good."

"In some circumstances, she might see the drawback."

"It's possible. For example, you, perhaps, think Mrs. Ashton justified?"

"I do not know," said Ruth. "If, when she married Ashton, she knew all a prairie farmer's wife must bear, she ought to have stayed; but if he consciously painted too bright a picture——"

"Tom did not know; he does not cheat. Since she grumbled about the absence of hot-water pipes and so forth, I believe they jarred; but when she vanished he went to search for her, and I imagine he has brooded ever since. Well, we are a queer lot. But do you think she will come back?"

"Something depends——" said Ruth. "I understand she was not a competent farmer's wife, and she would, of course, know Ashton knew. It's possible he told her. Some men never see the proper line."

"When you have sweated in the fields for twelve hours, to pretend you like your supper burned is hard; particularly if the next evening you find it's raw. Still, you imply that the light touch is useful, and to pretend might pay? Ashton is a good sort, but I mustn't claim his touch is light. However, you might get on with the argument."

"If Mrs. Ashton got a good post, she might, after a time, go back. It perhaps does not look logical; but one hates to be thought incompetent, and when she had shown that she had some useful qualities, to persuade her might be easier. If her luck was bad, I do not know. Sometimes one, without much grounds, is proud, and if I were Ashton, I would be disturbed. To be alone in a crowded prairie town is rather horrible."

The stovepipe throbbed and the snow beat the windows. One heard the wind, but only the house's front was lumber, and the storm's uproar was dulled. Its rage could not shake the solid earth, and Ruth felt the Cave a safe refuge. She admitted she had felt something like that before, when her host first carried her across the lonely plains. She ought, perhaps, to be embarrassed, but she was not, and Bob tranquilly smoked his pipe, as if for her to occupy his house was nothing fresh. All the same, the cold got keen, and it looked as if he saw her shiver, for he fetched a thick blue blanket from the bunk along the wall.

"I'll push your chair against the matchboarding," he said. "When a prairie blizzard gets to work, all one thinks about is, how to cheat the cold, and the usual rules go overboard. In summer, I use a camp cot in the back cave, but one would freeze in half an hour tonight. If you like, you might try the wall bunk."

"I would sooner keep my chair," Ruth said firmly.

The skin chair was made on a deck-chair's model, and since Bob had dropped the bar on a low notch, it was rather like a couch. When he resumed his box in the corner, he was at Ruth's feet, and he pulled the blanket across the moccasins he had given her. The stove was a defensive rampart between them and the worst cold.

"Since I'm stoker, I'll stick to my box, and I really don't know another spot where I wouldn't freeze," said Bob. "However, let's talk about something else. I believe you knew trooper Waring?"

"I did know him in England, some time since. When he called at the post-office for the police mail I was surprised."

"Exactly," said Bob with a twinkle. "I don't know if you got a knock, but I dare say you speculated about his

grounds for being where he was? A rather famous French phrase might meet the bill."

"At all events, I did not inquire," Ruth rejoined.

Bob gave her an approving nod.

"It frankly isn't done; looks as if you knew the Western rule. For example, you don't know my grounds for emigrating, and I am not going to bore you. However, if Waring goes discreetly, I dare say he'll make his mark. The young fellow is the sort the R.N.W. sometimes shove ahead."

"But you think he is not discreet. Let's be frank. You, perhaps, do not approve Miss Harmon?"

"So far as I know, Miss Harmon is a jolly girl. Her father is not a type I like, and when you don't like people, to be just is hard. Anyhow, if I was an ambitious young policeman, I'd buy my tobacco and so forth at another store."

Ruth's eyes sparkled. "I *hate* the Harmons. Father and daughter are greedy, cruel, and unscrupulous; but Waring has nothing to do with my dislike for them. All the same, at one time, he was my friend, and I would not like to see him entangled. The difficulty is, I cannot meddle."

Bob thought Ruth rather naïve; she perhaps wanted to imply that Waring was not at any time her lover.

"Yes," he said, "it's awkward. For a girl to warn a young man against another girl is, I suppose, invidious. If a man warned him, he'd be justified to knock the fellow out, but since Waring is a policeman his officers might not agree. Anyhow, the job is not my job, and I know where I stop. I'll brew some more coffee; the second lot. It looks as if Christmas Eve is going to be rather a hectic night."

Ruth drained the cup he gave her. Although the bottom of the stove was red, the cold was keen. She had thought coffee banished sleep, but perhaps the fight with the blizzard had exhausted her, for her brain got dull. Sometimes she forced herself to talk about the store. She admitted she had imagined she had not much talent for shopkeeping, but she was interested, and the fresh goods she had persuaded Mrs. Olsen to stock attracted customers. Sales were going up, and she weighed some further plans she thought ought to work.

Bob thought her happy at Glencoyne and liked her pluck; but by and by her remarks got vague and stopped, and he smiled. He hoped she might sleep for an hour or two. The storm got worse, but so long as the stovepipe top bore the strain, he need not bother. If the pipe were broken, smoke would fill the Cave, and since he could not get on the roof one must choose whether one would suffocate or freeze. At length Ruth languidly looked about, as if she did not know where she was. Bob poured fresh coffee into her cup.

"One o'clock, the night is going, and all's well. Might I hope you'll see numerous Christmases on the plains and all will be happy."

Ruth lifted the cup in a cold hand, and her smile was frank.

"I believe I shall be happy, and on Christmas morning one ought not to doubt. Let's wish good luck to all indomitable frontiersmen. If a tenderfoot is allowed to say so, you are a fine lot."

"We are mixed," said Bob. "So far, we are not important, and none but a few old-timers knows much about his job. All the same, we are willing to learn, and somehow we reckon to hold on until the lean years go."

For a time they talked, and then Ruth's eyes got heavy and the light got dim. When she woke she saw the lamp's flame was low.

Bob was very quiet; in his big coat, his figure was shapeless and uncouth, but she knew he watched. Although the storm raged, all was well. And it was Christmas morning, when one might, confidently, look in front. Ruth let herself go slack; Bob and the lamp got indistinct and soon she was restfully asleep.

A bitter draught pierced her blankets like a knife, the door shut noisily, and she saw Hope by the table. Day had broken and the morning was strangely calm. Ruth got off her chair and shivered, but she gave Hope a smile.


"A happy Christmas, Adam! I suppose you have come for me?"

"Sure," said Hope. "Martha's scared. I guess she reckoned I might be going to your funeral."

"She ought not to be disturbed; I was with Bob," said Ruth, in a quiet voice.

"Well, I guess that's all right; he's a pretty good scout, and I mightn't have made the homestead," Hope agreed. "However, he's holding my team, and since they mustn't stand, we'll get going."

They went to the door. The wind had dropped and the snow sparkled in the rising sun.



CHAPTER XVII

THE WATCH BY THE RIVER

CONSTABLES Waring and Smithson were back in the wilds behind the settlements, and one dark evening steered north between the scattered bluffs. Their ostensible business was to haul supplies for an exploration patrol coming south from the forest belt, where, since frozen rivers are used for roads, travel is awkward and sometimes risky after the ice breaks. They, however, had another object about which they were ordered not to talk.

When the Ottawa Government claimed the plains, the Crees and Blackfoot were moved back to their reservations, and a number, copying the white men, began to cultivate the soil. They were, however, hunters by instinct and tradition, and although the Hudson's Bay factors pushed on farther north, some skins might yet be bought, particularly if the trader paid with rum. The traffic was sternly punished, but the profit was large.

The constables' coats were on the hand-sledge, and Waring hauled a good load, but the runners slid smoothly across the wet snow. One knows by the easier traction when a thaw begins. Their breath floated like a white cloud in the raw, saturated air, and Waring thought that the steam from his tired body was faintly visible. The thermometer was not yet high, but after the arctic cold he sweated in the snow, and for the first time for six months, his damp clothes stuck to his skin. All the same, he did not grumble. At length, winter was going.

"When we nooned I saw a crow; to-morrow we might see a flock," he said. "In three or four weeks, the brant geese will splash in the sloos, and we'll be done with thick greasy blankets and the stinking stove. The tar from the elbow-joint drips into my bunk, and when the guardroom does not smell of hot iron like a foundry, it smells like a sheep pen."

Smithson grinned. In winter, all he wanted was food and warmth; he reckoned Waring was one of the fellows who got into a bath every evening, and then put on fresh clothes. All the same, when he got up on a fresh horse he was as good as another, and when he broke the trail in dry snow you must hustle the sledge along. Smithson had some time since found out that a man might be a good trooper although he talked in a cultivated voice.

"Spring is surely coming, and if the boys are not out of the woods soon, they might have to swim," he said. "I reckon we'll get rain tonight, and in twenty-four hours she'll wash off the snow. To pack the stuff we're hauling would certainly be some job."

Waring agreed. On the damp snow the sledge ran easily, but to carry the load on their backs was another thing. For all that, the exploration patrol would need the food. The frost had broken soon, and the party across the Assiniboine watershed was entangled among small lakes and rivers. Then spring began in the west where warm Pacific winds blew down the Rockies' passes, and since the high plains slope was east, the melted snow went to Lake Winnipeg and Hudson Bay. On the whole, the wheat belt was a dry tableland, but on its northern dip, where the pine woods began, lakes and rivers were numerous.

He looked about. Dusk would soon fall, and the sky

and bluffs were gray. On the tableland, the trees were birch and poplar and none was large. The ground rolled, and as the light went the snow got faintly blue. All was very quiet, and only the dark clouds moved. Waring imagined the loneliness might daunt a tenderfoot, but so long as a plainsman had food and a hatchet and blankets, he could front the night. Besides, by contrast, the evening was warm.

At dusk they pitched camp in thick timber on the bank of the ravine, in the depths of which a frozen creek looped about. Waring scraped the snow back from the dead leaves and gathered dry wood; Smithson cut branches for a screen and bed, and fixed the ground-sheets for a canopy. Two small logs made a hearth, and when the wood snapped in the flames Smithson engaged to cook. After a hard march, Waring frankly hated the labor of pitching camp, but unless all were properly done, one might freeze by morning.

When he had satisfied his appetite, he lighted his pipe. Three or four yards off, thin smoke curled across the clustering trunks; behind the cheerful illumination the wilderness rolled back to the Arctic Sea. A grim country, in which a white man must fight Nature for his life; haunted by mosquitoes in summer, when the muskegs were soft and angry rivers rolled through the tangled woods; in winter, when travel was easiest, bound by iron frost.

Waring drained his can of green tea, and pictured winter evenings when he had come back, healthily tired after a day in a snipe bog, to an English country house. Steaming water splashed in the large, white bath, and sometimes he extravagantly used his sister's aromatic salts. Then he put on fresh, thin clothes. In the Northwest, one did not

pull off one's boots when one went to bed. The simple life had drawbacks.

Anyhow, it was done with. He had been a fool, but not, so to speak, a criminal fool, and he must pay for his folly. If there was virtue in asceticism, he might claim a monk's austerity, but he doubted. As a rule, the trappers and prospectors who came back from the woods indulged in the sort of jag one might properly call carnival. But a policeman must not. Moreover, Waring admitted that jags were expensive, and he had had enough.

By and by Smithson vaguely indicated the North.

"Up there it's pretty fierce. I was once across the Churchill; the Reindeer mosquitoes ate us, and I reckon we portaged the canoe fifty miles. When we struck hardwood scrub, you couldn't sleep for the leach-bugs that fell down your neck. I guess nobody knows the country, and the creeks we hit were not on the sergeant's map."

"The Hudson's Bay agents and half-breeds traded in the forest belt a hundred years since," Waring replied.

"Then, I guess they never told the Ottawa Government all they knew. The *Metis* breeds pulled out for good when Louis Riel was hanged, and now the H.B.C. runs grocery-stores along the railroad-track. Well, the Regina bosses reckon somebody is smuggling liquor. When you must freight your stuff by hand-sledge, transport's expensive, and the Indians have got no money."

"You might get skins," said Waring. "Some folks will pay a good price for moose and caribou heads. The Hudson's Bay keep the game-laws, and do not trade in smuggled liquor. They claim they never sold a bottle of hootch in the old days when the North was theirs. All the same, Mack's persuaded somebody is smuggling liquor, and he believes he knows the man."

"Maybe so. Our orders are to stop the trade. D'you think we can do it?"

"We have got to try. Anyhow, if Wilshaw is coming down from the Hartshorn country, he's between the patrol and us. He might have spotted their campfires' smoke, but he doesn't know we are about."

Smithson, lifting his hand, looked up. The trees began to murmur, and shining drops slanted across the light.

"There's the rain. Winter's gone," he said.

They shifted the ground-sheet canopy and cut fresh branches for their weather screen, but the camp was not a comfortable camp, and when Smithson slept Waring fed the sulky, sputtering fire. For all that, the wind was a Pacific wind, and the dry, searing frost at length had broken. A soothing damp touched his skin, and when big drops splashed his face he did not grumble. For six months it had looked as if the prairie belt was dead, but in a week or two the purple crocus would push, like a symbol of resurrection, through the steaming turf, and soon the splendid red lilies would roll in the wind. The past, like the snow, was done with, and when winter went fresh hope sprang. After all he had a man's job, and he might yet make good.

In the morning the snow, for the most part, had vanished, and since the sledge was no longer useful, they loaded up all the stuff they could carry and pushed on across the white dead grass. At noon they went back for a fresh load, and for two or three days laboriously relayed the stores from camp to camp. On some stages, where their line went through woods and across wild-currant scrub, they seven times plowed along the awkward trail. For all that, when they made the rendezvous

by a river dotted uncertainly on the map, nobody was about.

The river, coming down from the southwest, looped about a point. Thick timber bordered the high clay bank, and Waring imagined the patrol would follow the frozen stream. The snow had melted, and a soft wind ruffled the shallow pools on the ice. Sometimes a crack like a pistol-shot indicated that the angry current strained against its covering; at one or two spots a crack had opened and water bubbled up. Soon the river would hurl the smashing floes down-channel, but one could not calculate when the ice would go.

Three or four days went and Waring began to be anxious for the patrol, but he dared not leave the rendezvous, and he and Smithson loafed about the camp. Then, one afternoon, it looked as if the melted snow from the watershed had reached the spot, for the pools on the surface joined and the thick ice labored noisily. Waring, on top of the high peninsula, smoked his pipe and watched the river; Smithson, at the camp, mended his fire, and a plume of blue smoke floated across the trees. By and by he climbed the hill.

"She's burning pretty good, and I'm baking a bannock in the ash," he said. "We'll take supper before the light goes."

For some distance, the point commanded the river, and by and by he jumped to his feet.

"Looks as if the boys had made it. There's the first two, but I don't know them yet."

Where the river began to curve back, two men followed the channel. Their figures were small and indistinct, but Waring saw one hauled a sledge and he noted their slow advance. They were perhaps tired, or perhaps they went

cautiously, for where the stream was fast the ice might not be sound, and queer, ringing noises echoed in the trees.

"There ought to be more," said Waring. "Two might have pushed ahead to get supplies from us. Anyhow, they are keeping the other bank. As a rule, the stream is slackest by the salient curve, and ice, of course, holds longest in the slacks."

"If the others come up, we might cross, but in the meantime we must stop where we were told," Smithson replied. "Those fellows' coats are on the sledge, but I don't seem to spot our uniform."

The afternoon was dark and the small figures had for a background gray trees and lead-colored ice. All one could distinguish was that they moved upstream. By and by they stopped for a moment or two; and then, steering for the bank, vanished in the wood. Smithson knitted his brows.

"It's queer! The boys know they ought to find us at the point. Why d'you think they stopped?"

For a few moments Waring pondered and looked about. He imagined the patrol's food was exhausted and their first thought would be to get fresh supplies. The wind had dropped, and the smoke from Smithson's fire went straight up from the trees. Noting the long blue plume, he saw a light.

"They are not police. They spotted our fire."

"Wilshaw?" said Smithson. "How are we going to get him? If we go across he'll see us on the ice."

Waring agreed. If the strangers were honest folk, they would steer for the camp, but there was no use in plunging impulsively ahead. His antagonist was a woodsman, and had perhaps known the patrol was behind him, but

he did not yet know who was in front, and that his advance was marked. The proper line was to steal across in the dark; the woods would embarrass the fellow, and he might risk pitching camp. Waring knocked out his pipe.

"Let's get supper. Wilshaw does not know who we are, and will not expect us to look him up. When it's too dark for him to see us we will try our luck."

They ate bacon and bannock, and Smithson threw green wood on the fire. If Wilshaw watched the point, the smoke might indicate that they were stopping for the night. Waring loaded his heavy revolver, and thought dusk fell slowly. The police were authorized to shoot, and he could hit his mark as well as another, but he felt his youth. While he was yet at school, his antagonist knew the woods. The trees slowly melted; the ice cracked, and queer hollow ringing noises pierced the gloom. Nobody could calculate how long the straining crust would carry its load, but as a rule a Canadian river breaks spectacularly, and when the smashing floes drove down-channel, Waring hoped he would not be on the ice. All the same, a Royal North-West constable must not stop for a risk, and when he got up his mouth was tight.

"I don't know where we will get breakfast, but we'll push off," he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LONG ARM

WARING kept his side of the river. To cross at the point might help him take a shorter line to the spot where the strangers had vanished, and to reach their camp, so to speak, from behind might have some advantages; and he and Smithson had weighed the plan. They did not, however, know if the fellows would stop for the night, and if one was Wilshaw, they might expect him to pitch his camp some distance off. Then, although they had marked the spot where the others took the bank and thought they could find it from the river, to do so in thick timber might be impossible.

On the salient curve, the wooded bank sloped, and Wilshaw reckoned the water shallow. The main stream would sweep the other side, where the trees rolled down a pitch that in the dark looked rather like a cliff, and the ice would be thinnest in the swift current at the bottom of the cliff. All the same, for as long as possible, he must keep the hollow curve. Water had begun to trickle along the ice, and he imagined he felt the melting crust heave and strain. He certainly heard it strain, and in the gloom the noise was ominous.

Moreover, when one thought about it, the adventure was ridiculous. If the strangers had camped by the waterside, they were honest folk. If one was Wilshaw and the smoke had alarmed him, to search for a frontiersman in thick timber was a hopeless job. Waring, in fact, saw three or four sound arguments for turning back,

but he pushed ahead. For one thing, he dared not report to his officers that he thought he had seen a man suspected of smuggling liquor, but had not tried to find out if his surmise was accurate. He did not know if Smithson saw the risks they ran. Jake was a useful pal, but he did not indulge his imagination; his habit was to carry out his orders.

For a few moments they stopped, and Waring thought the water in which they stood rippled against his boots. Twenty yards off, a noise like an explosion echoed in the dark cliff. The ice under his feet trembled, and he sensed the imprisoned river's fight for freedom.

"Pretty fierce!" said Smithson. "We'll get on a move. You can't tell where she'll break, but she might begin right here, and I'd sooner be somewhere else."

For a time, all was quiet, and although they felt the ice worked, they pushed on. The top was not slippery, for the first two or three inches were rather solidified snow than ice. Then, where the bank across the river sloped at an easy pitch, a queer bubbling noise began.

"Sounds like water welling up from a crack. The fellows landed not far off," Waring remarked.

Smithson advanced a few yards, and signaled.

"Sure they did. We have hit their camp."

Obliquely across the river, a pale reflection trembled behind the trunks, vanished for a few moments, and leaped up brighter than before. Waring knitted his brows. He hesitated to cross the rotten, working ice, and if the fire was Wilshaw's, the fellow's nerve was good. He might shout and ask the campers' business, but if it had something to do with smuggling, they would steal off noiselessly, and he had hoped to reach the spot before they knew the police were about. Then, since the penalty

for smuggling was stern, the others might shoot. Anyhow, he mustn't cogitate. The adventure was not the sort of adventure one dwelt upon.

"We have got to surprise them; but see your gun is loose," he said.

The fire was half-way up the bank, and the reflections did not touch the ice. Until one got round the curve, they were hidden by the trees, and now all one saw was a fitful illumination behind the black trunks. Ominous noises pierced the gloom by the wood, but Waring steered across. Smithson, as his habit was, went stolidly where his business was to go.

The ice tilted under Waring's advanced foot, water gurgled noisily, and he felt its cold touch on his leg. His leg went down. It looked as if the slab was loose and its other end went up, like a pivoted rat-trap. He tried to swing back, but his body went forward, and he knew he was slipping into the hole. When he went under, the trap's lid would close, and shut him in for good.

Smithson seized him. Water splashed, he heard explosive cracks, and he was back on the firm ice. His knees shook and his skin was wet by sweat. For a few moments he got his breath, and tried for calm.

"Did I shout?" he asked.

"Not so far's I remember," Smithson replied. "If we are going across, we must try another spot."

So far as they could distinguish, the ice for a short distance, was broken and loose. The current, flung back from the jutting bank, had perhaps cracked the thinner stuff along the hollow curve, but they found a firm belt and crossed it cautiously.

When they landed, the fire was not far in front, and

although their advance through the timber was not noiseless, nothing indicated that the campers were disturbed. At length Waring, his hand on his revolver butt, pushed through a wild-currant bush, and stopped. Where two trees had fallen, a fire burned in the gap, but nobody was about. Waring swore and shoved back his pistol.

"They didn't stop," said Smithson. "Maybe they thought we'd see the smoke and wait for dark. Then the fire would be a pretty good mark for us while they pulled out the other way."

"I doubt if that was all," said Waring, in a queer grim voice. "When they landed, the light was good, and I do not think the ice broke afterwards. If it did not, when they made their fire they reckoned they'd soon be done with us. In fact, but for you, I'd now be half a mile off, under the thick ice."

Smithson swore. He did not know another way to indulge his emotions. Waring stretched his wet leg to the fire and brooded. The Assiniboine farmers were a sober, industrious lot, but frontiersmen of another sort drifted about the plains. Their object was easy money, and they had some grounds to hate the Mounted Police. Moreover, they were not squeamish. Their code was rather like the Indian's code, and they were not satisfied to baffle an antagonist who might beat them another time. Waring thought Wilshaw had planned to drown him, but he did not really know, and he imagined he would not find out.

There was no use in his trying to trail the brute, and his orders were to wait at the point. Besides, if Wilshaw went downriver, he might run up against the patrol, and the load on his sledge might justify his arrest. When

Waring stated his argument Smithson agreed, and, looking for firm ice, they went back to their camp.

In the morning, Smithson crossed the river and after an hour or two returned. He had found no tracks, and reckoned Wilshaw had stolen away over the ice. Wilshaw, in fact, had done so, but his luck was not good, for when, shortly before daybreak, he followed the curving bank round a wooded bluff, he saw a fire and somebody ordered him to stop. A noise in front indicated broken ice, and Wilshaw waited. All his sledge now carried was some food and clothes, and the police were first-class shots. Then, although they might suspect the object for his excursion, they did not know, and he had baffled the police before. His companion's nerve was less firm, and he started for the other bank. A rifle exploded and he dropped with a splash in a shallow pool.

In the afternoon, a sergeant, two or three constables, and Wilshaw arrived at the camp on the point. They hauled two sledges, on one of which their blankets and winter coats were neatly stowed. A ruffianly fellow, wrapped in an old skin coat, occupied the other.

"We are right glad to see you boys," the sergeant said. "I suppose you brought some grub along?"

Waring said the supplies ought to carry the party to the settlements, and Smithson would soon serve a meal. Then he took the sergeant a few yards back into the timber and narrated his attempt to seize the smugglers. The sergeant told him a bullet had gone through their prisoner's leg, but had missed the bone and had not cut any important blood-vessel.

"He certainly can't walk, and in the meantime I don't know what we are going to do about it," he remarked. "To begin with, we'll eat, and then we must try to get

something from Wilshaw, but you'll wait for a sign from me."

Smithson served a generous supper, and helped the wounded man, who did not thank him. None of the police knew the fellow, and Waring thought him a dull and sullen brute. After supper the sergeant lighted his pipe, and turned to Wilshaw.

"You can take a smoke. So far, you haven't told us much, but we have got to talk, and I don't know but it might pay to stick to the truth."

"'Pears to me you're looking for trouble," Wilshaw rejoined. "Unless you got an order for his arrest, you can't stop a man who's going quietly about his business."

"I've known it done; sometimes one takes a chance. But what was your business."

"If you don't think I told you right, to find out is your job."

"I believe we're going to," the sergeant remarked.

For a few moments he occupied himself with his pipe, and Waring reflected that sometimes the police used methods a lawyer might successfully challenge, but as a rule the methods were justified, and at all events, their object was good.

"When we held you up, all the stuff on your sled was your camp outfit and some grub," the sergeant resumed. "Well, when you turned back near the point, I reckon you hauled another load. The ground's hard; unless you carry dynamite, you couldn't make a hole, and I don't see you shove the stuff under the ice. Looks as if all we had to do was to find your *cache*."

"Then why don't you get to it?" Wilshaw inquired.

"Well, well," said the sergeant, "you're surely obstinate! You stopped when you were ordered, but since

you claim to be honest travelers, why did your partner quit?"

"For one thing, Steve is a damfool. Then, since some timber wolves got after him in North Ontario his nerve isn't good."

"Looks like that," said the sergeant. "He's a fool, all right, and I've a kind of notion I know another. I can't let you go, Pete. Constable Waring wants you."

Waring got up. "I have an order for your arrest, Wilshaw. You are charged with housebreaking, and the theft of a letter, at Glencoyne post-office. I will read you the document, and you are warned that anything you state may be used at your trial."

Wilshaw clenched his fist, and the blood leaped to his dark skin. He had rather obviously got a knock, but somehow Waring thought the revengeful passion he indulged was not directed against the police. At length, when Waring put up the warrant, Wilshaw's look got calm, and he gave him a derisive smile.

"Why, the letter you claim I stole was mine!"

"Not at all. When you have mailed a letter, it's the post-office's."

Wilshaw shrugged. "Well, if you reckon you can fix it on to me, you can go ahead. I certainly am not going to help."

"Guard the prisoner, boys," said the sergeant, and signing Waring to follow him into the timber, resumed: "The notion looks like McBride's, and if Mack is handling the case, I guess Pete will be sent up. Anyhow, we hold him for trial, and in the meantime we ought to find his *cache*, and get a line on his customers. You got an order for the stores you brought?"

Waring gave him the document, and when the other had studied it he said:

"The boys are tired, and somehow we have got to pack the hurt man along. Looks as if I might risk stopping at the camp for two or three days. For one thing, I want to find that *cache*; but I don't want to feed all the gang. The prisoner is yours and Smithson's, and you'll pull out for the settlements, taking the stores you need to carry you there. So long as you have the grubpack, I guess Pete won't try to make his get-away, but when you are near the homesteads, you might feed him light. Go by Lone Lake, and tell Watson to meet us with his rig. When can you start?"

"As soon as our packs are made, Sergeant," Waring replied.

CHAPTER XIX

WARING'S PIOUS RESOLVE

WARING'S journey to the settlements was something of a strain. On the Northwest tablelands spring comes late but suddenly, and when the snow was hardly vanished the white dead grass steams in the hot sun. For long he and Smithson had fronted arctic cold, but now their winter clothes were a burden, and they must carry all a white man needs when he pitches camp for the night. Moreover, the woods through which they forced a path were dripping wet, in open ground the turf got spongy soft, and at hollow spots they must curve round sloos where the melted snow had run. Four or five inches below the surface, the gumbo soil was frozen like a rock, the water could not drain away, and in the spring thaw gumbo sticks to one's boots like glue.

Wilshaw's load was as large as possible, but they dared not allow him to carry food, and unless they were willing to be his porters, he could not be handcuffed. Then the nights were cold, and although the prisoner slept, the police by turns must watch. Yet Waring felt the worst strain was not physical. At the point, Wilshaw had cheated him, and but for the patrol's arrival might have made good his escape. In fact, he and Smithson had not much grounds to boast, and if they were cheated another time, to satisfy their officers might be hard, and all hope of promotion would be gone. Sometimes when he kept his four hours' watch by the campfire he mused.

In the Old Country he had squandered his opportunities, and his relations had thought him an embarrassment. They were willing to let him go, and in Canada he had, without their help, got a useful but not remarkably soft job. Since he was not altogether a fool, he hoped to hold the job, and work for advancement. If he was an officer of the Royal North-West he'd be satisfied. In consequence, he must guard his prisoner.

Wilshaw gave them no trouble. For the most part, he was sullen, and rather obviously brooded. Waring thought the fellow had planned to drown him; the police were his natural antagonists, and if their destruction implied his freedom, he might not hesitate. Pete was not altogether civilized; one sensed a queer, primitive vein. All the same, Waring imagined he and Smithson were not the subject of their prisoner's revengeful cogitations, and when they camped one evening Wilshaw asked:

"Who put you on to me for stealing that letter?"

"I don't know," said Waring. "The order to arrest you was from the district office."

"You might make a guess. Give me the fellow's name, and you have my promise I'll go with you to the guardroom."

"You are going there, anyhow," Smithson rejoined. "Our habit is to treat a prisoner right, but for you to make trouble wouldn't pay. Come on and help fix these branches, unless you'd sooner sleep in the grass."

Wilshaw did not resume his inquiries, but for three or four nights Waring's sleep was disturbed, and to see the first homestead was some relief. The farmer agreed to take his wagon as far north as possible in order to meet the patrol, and after stopping for the night the group pushed on.

About six o'clock the next evening they reached another farm. The ship-lap house was rather large and well built, and Warburton's scattered neighbors thought him extravagant, but he used a prairie wagon, and when the police arrived the rig at the door was the rig commercial travelers hired at the Glencoyne livery. When the group was a few yards off Pearl Harmon came to the door. Waring stopped in surprise; Pearl smiled. She had watched the others' advance and planned her rather theatrical entrance.

The loaded troopers carried the stains of travel, and their uniforms were splashed by gumbo mud. Pearl's clothes were fresh, and she knew the recent fashion draped the material attractively about her figure's flowing lines. Then the large hat, which she had carefully fixed when she knew who the strangers were, was the proper frame and background for her face. In fact, she imagined the picture was the sort of picture a young man might like to study.

She did not bother about Smithson. He was not important, and she knew him for a dull fellow. He, no doubt, thought about his supper, and began to loose his pack. Wilshaw gave her a strange, searching glance, and Waring for a moment knitted his brows. The men had not re-acted altogether as she had thought, but she reckoned Waring was afraid of her, and that was something. Wilshaw was obviously his prisoner, and his arrest might be awkward. All the same, Pete ought to know her his friend.

"Where is Warburton?" Waring inquired. "We reckoned on getting supper and camping with him."

"I expect he's across the Rockies. Victoria, B.C., is the place where swell Englishmen go when they can't

meet their bills. Anyhow, he quit some time since, and the farm is ours."

"I'm sorry. Warburton is a good sort. Then, you see, I am English."

"You don't say?" Pearl remarked with ironical surprise. "However, since Pop must pay the taxes, he's going to work the farm, and Irvine will sow the crop. I rode across to carry a message, and in the morning I go back. Mrs. Irvine is here, and to cheat you of your supper would be too bad. Besides, she's a bully cook."

Waring politely refused. The party's rations were not exhausted, and he would sooner not be Harmon's guest, but he said if Irvine were willing they would camp in the barn. Pearl said Irvine was at a farm six or seven miles off, and she waited his return. Then she studied the moody prisoner.

"Why have you got Wilshaw?"

"A policeman must be discreet," said Waring. "If he likes, he might tell you."

"I don't like, and I guess she don't need to ask," Wilshaw rejoined sullenly.

Pearl shrugged. Waring thought her puzzled, but she said:

"Well, I reckoned you'd know I was sorry, but if it hurts, you don't have to be civil." She turned to Waring. "Since you won't take supper with us, Mrs. Irvine will bring you some hot biscuit, and I hope you're not too proud to use our cordwood."

They lighted their fire, and by and by Mrs. Irvine carried across the biscuit, a slab of desiccated-apple pie, and some other articles. She was a small, thin woman, and her look was tired. Since she and her husband were

Harmon's servants, Waring imagined they had not an easy post.

"When you are through, you might bring the plates to the house," she said.

After supper they smoked their pipes. Behind the house, two plow oxen and a light horse roamed about a wire-fenced corral, and a bluff occupied the slope of an incline a quarter of a mile off. A sloo sparkled in a hollow, and a wavy line of timber indicated a sunk creek. In the background, small scattered woods melted into the plain. By and by Smithson cleaned Mrs. Irvine's plates.

"Maybe you'd like to go along to the house," he said to Waring. "Pete's been a pretty good prisoner, but watching him makes me tired, and if we put him in the stable until Irvine's back, I reckon he'll be all right."

"You can't be tireder than I am," Wilshaw rejoined. "You can put me where you like, so long as you go somewhere else."

Waring smiled. Constant watchfulness was something of a strain, and since they started from the river he had not for five minutes been without Wilshaw's society. He had frankly had enough, but as they were near the settlements, where Pete had friends, caution must be used, and he examined the stable.

The door was at one end of the ship-lap building. At the other end was a sort of loose box, in which a quantity of hay was stacked against the wall. The stuff had been mown eight or nine months since, and was built up in compact blocks. A wooden corn-bin occupied a corner, and it looked as if Irvine used the loose box for a fodder store. Waring found the door could be

fastened from the outside, and leaving Smithson on guard, he went to the house.

Pearl ordered him to come in. Cordwood snapped in the kitchen stove, and after his bleak camps in the wilds, he thought the matchboarded room home-like and warm. Pearl gave him a friendly smile.

"Mrs. Irvine has gone about some chores," she said. "I hate to be lonesome, and the evenings are cold. Pull a chair to the stove and talk to me; but if you like, you can smoke your pipe and I will talk to you."

"It looks the more attractive plan," said Waring and pulled out his pipe.

"You are a modest young fellow," Pearl remarked. "Then, I guess your officers don't encourage you to give away your confidence. However, you can tell me one thing that everybody soon will know. You have got Pete for stealing the letter from the post-office?"

"That is the charge."

"Very well. Who put your officers on to him?"

"Wilshaw inquired," said Waring. "Since I'd hate to refuse you, I am rather glad I can frankly declare I don't know."

He wondered whether Pearl was satisfied, for he imagined she pondered his reply. Wilshaw's curiosity, so to speak, was natural, but to account for Pearl's was another thing, and there was, perhaps, not much use in his trying to do so. When he last visited at the homestead, Warburton was his host, and he had liked the hopeful, cultivated Englishman. Harmon had very possibly exploited Warburton's extravagance; anyhow, he had seized the farm, and when one thought about Pearl one pictured her greedy, unscrupulous father. In fact,

one felt the storekeeper hovered, like an ominous shadow, behind the girl.

The Glencoyne settlers pinched and sweated. In summer their work began at daybreak and stopped at dark. They fronted scorching sun and biting cold, their meals were sternly frugal, and their clothes were cheap. Yet, as a rule, when a crop was harvested, Harmon claimed the wheat. Waring admitted that merchants were useful, and no doubt ran some risk, but somehow they prospered, and their customers went broke.

All the same, Pearl was not accountable for her father's greediness, and her charm was marked. Since Waring was flesh and blood, it moved him. Sometimes he rebelled, but when she was friendly he began to think his instinctive distrust ridiculous. By and by she looked up.

"To be a Mounted Policeman isn't all some romantic folks might think."

"That is so, particularly in winter. However, I dare say all jobs have drawbacks."

Pearl smiled. "There's no use in pretending you are dull. When you are a Policeman you must watch your step, and you can't be friendly where you like."

"You mustn't exaggerate. So far, I don't think I have allowed my duties to over-rule my private inclinations."

"Now you talk like a swell Englishman," Pearl remarked. "Besides, I wonder—— You see, Pop and I are not your sort."

"In the democratic Territories we are all one sort. Still, I suppose there are differences. For example, Miss Harmon, of Glencoyne, is important, but a police private is not."

"But suppose you didn't stay there, Private Waring? You don't have to."

"It looks as if I must, and on the whole, I'm satisfied," Waring rejoined.

He thought Pearl studied him with a touch of malicious humor. She was not cultivated, but she was keen, and sometimes her banter got embarrassing. Anyhow, the stove was hot, and he pushed back his chair. His action was mechanical, but Pearl laughed.

"A good trooper takes no chances? You might go right behind the stove."

Waring hesitated. He was willing to play up, but he knew that Pearl was cleverer than he, and somehow he felt she had an object for her challenge. The spot he now occupied commanded the window, and he saw Mrs. Irvine carry a pail past the end of the stable. She vanished behind the building, and Waring imagined she went to the well. He noted that the corral fence was but a few yards from the path she took, and the horse was near the wire. At the other end of the stable, Smithson supposititiously watched the door. In the background the dark bluffs cut the sunset's red and green. It looked as if Pearl had remarked Mrs. Irvine, for she said:

"In the Old Country you don't boil your clothes in a coal-oil can. And when you want hot water, all you have to do is to turn a tap."

"As a rule, that is so, but something depends on the plumber," Waring agreed.

"You're a queer lot," said Pearl in a thoughtful voice. "I reckon you yourself had all a young man ought to want, but you're willing to clean stables and sleep in the grass. In summer, you sweat on the dusty plains; in winter, you freeze on exploration patrol. If you don't lose your hands and feet by frostbite, you might be an officer, but you'll never be rich, and in the meantime, the

lowest grade business clerk gets better pay than you. If I were a red-blooded young fellow, I'd quit."

Waring shrugged. There was no use in his talking imperially, and in Canada one was satisfied to be Canadian.

"Oh, well, if I wait, I might get fired. Then, after all, the job I have is a man's job."

"And a swell Englishman has nothing to do with business? For instance, you'd hate to keep a store?"

"I'd hate to go broke. If you have not the proper talents, I expect you do go broke."

"I have known some slobs make good," said Pearl. "I suppose you think a storekeeper has to be unscrupulous? You wouldn't persuade a customer to buy stuff he didn't want. And you're too proud to cheat? Well, at the Harmon store you get the goods you ask for, and you get the proper weight."

It looked as if Pearl were annoyed; and Waring wondered if she thought he had not played up as he might. For all that, he would sooner she was in an angry than a melting mood. Then he turned his glance to the window, and in a moment was on his feet. Wilshaw was outside the stable, at the opposite end from the door Smithson watched, and but ten or twelve yards from the horse in the corral. Then he heard a swift step, and, swinging round, saw Pearl blocked his way. Her back was against the door, and her eyes sparkled mockingly.

"I'm 'most as strong as you, and for a minute or two I reckon to stop," she said. "If you try to move me, I'll shout for help."

Waring dared not risk it. He imagined Mrs. Irvine was not far off, and would support the girl's tale. Moreover, Smithson did not know Wilshaw was outside the stable, and if Pearl shouted, he would start for the house.

Jake was his pal, but Waring doubted if he could persuade him the girl had no grounds to be alarmed, and to persuade the officers who inquired about his prisoner's escape might be harder.

For a moment it looked as if the jade controlled the situation; and then Waring seized a chair. The window was double, and in winter the outside frame was firmly fixed and caulked; but he could smash the thin bars. Moreover, for him to do so would rather embarrass Pearl than him. Miss Harmon was obviously not as clever as she, perhaps, had thought.

"Are you going to stand back from the door?" he gasped.

He swung the chair; and then, throwing it across the room, commandingly signed the girl. She joined him, and they saw Wilshaw turn away from the corral fence. Pushing his hands in his pockets, he slouched round the stable and stopped in front of Smithson, who, perhaps, had heard his step, for he jumped from behind the building's other end. The picture frankly baffled Waring. He wondered whether Miss Harmon was puzzled, but she was royally angry.

"Pete is a damfool! I don't know if you're another," she remarked. "That window is not fast. All you had to do was to push it back. When a man gets going I s'pose he doesn't stop to think?"

"Sometimes that is so, but I was forced to think," said Waring with a breathless laugh. "You see, a policeman's character is all he has got, and I imagined you might not allow me to break the glass. If I had done so, you would have had to account for my *breaking out*."

Pearl studied him, and although her skin was touched

by red, and her brows were knit, he sensed something like approval.

"After all, you are brighter than some young men I know," she said. "Anyhow, you have got me beaten. I reckon you are not going to boast about it."

She pulled back the door, and signed that he might go. Waring went to the stable and found Wilshaw sitting in the grass, with handcuffs on his wrists.

"He got out at the back," said Smithson. "The end wall's cut five or six feet up, so's you can shove in hay off a wagon, but when you're in the stable you can't see where they pull down the boards, because the stuff's piled up in the stall."

"How did you find out?" Waring asked Wilshaw.

"I was told, and when I pulled down some hay I saw the fork-hole door."

Waring nodded. Mrs. Irvine had carried her bucket behind the stable, at the opposite end from Smithson's and she had, no doubt, tapped on the wall.

"Then, why didn't you climb the fence and get on the horse?"

"I was going to," said Wilshaw, and for a moment stopped. Glancing straight in front with something like Indian calm, he resumed: "It looked too easy. Smithson would have heard me, and I didn't know where you were, but the police are pretty good shots. Well, I had a kind of notion somebody wanted me to be shot."

Waring wondered. He thought Wilshaw exaggerated, but he did not know. He was, however, satisfied about one thing; Miss Harmon was dangerous, and he had done with her. Henceforward he would concentrate on his job, and sternly leave young women of her type alone.

CHAPTER XX

AT LOWEST EBB

AT THE end of the furrow Latimer pushed back his hat from his wet forehead and balanced himself awkwardly on the breaker plow. Sunset was not for two or three hours, but it looked as if he must stop. Where the land had rested in summer fallow, the disc-harrows ought to run easily, and he could soon drill in the wheat. Under the thick virgin turf, however, the frost was not altogether gone, the furrows he had turned were ragged, and when the plow-point struck a frozen block, the shock on their collars galled the oxen. Although sometimes Buck and Bright knew where to stop, their shoulders were getting sore. Bob had a horse team, but where the traction is heavy a span of oxen will do three horses' work, and when they get a jolt they do not plunge and squeal.

Pulling out his pipe, Bob looked down the long furrow. The clods shone with a greasy luster, and one noted the soil's clean smell. The wheat plant thrived in the black stuff, and its roots followed down the sinking damp. On the steaming surface, oats would spring almost in a night. In the summer fallow, the chocolate-black was touched by gray and silver where the stuff had dried; behind it, knee-high stubble shone like red gold. In the background, the dead grass, stippled by tender green, rolled in long slow waves. Geese and ducks yet trailed across the sky, little blue crocuses checkered the sod, and in the bluffs the birches opened fresh leaves. Winter was gone, and

Bob felt returning life and hope marked summer's swift advance.

He admitted his breaking fresh ground was perhaps rashly hopeful, and it implied his hiring a driver for his second team, but caution had not helped him much. The tide of his and his neighbors' fortune was at its lowest ebb, and if it did not turn, another bad year would break the lot. Well, if he did smash, he would smash splendidly.

He ought to loose his oxen. When he had let them go he might burn off the stubble; in fact, he might occupy himself with numerous other chores. All the same, in the long winter, one's muscles get soft, and since the snow melted he had labored fourteen hours a day. Then he had not for some time opened his English newspapers.

Bob loosed the oxen, and Buck blew through his nostrils with a sort of explosive sigh; Bright, as if he sympathized, licked the other's neck. Bob lowered himself into the warm grass and rested his back against the plow. He had not thought to sleep, but when a horse stopped he did not look up. Ruth Allen, on the horse's back, looked down.

Two large red oxen stood by the plow, their calm eyes fixed on the man in the grass. His body had slipped down and his bent arm was under his head. His blue shirt strained across his chest, an old belt marked his hollow waist, and his long, crossed legs, harmoniously carried out his body's lines. For all his light build, one knew him muscular, and his brown face was thin and calm. Ruth noted a puzzling stamp some frontiersmen wear; refined was not quite accurate, perhaps ascetic was the word. Then her horse moved and the saddle creaked.

"For men must work," she said.

Bob jumped to his feet and laughed.

"Why, Ruth! Since you have caught me out, I mustn't boast about my industry another time. I hope I'm allowed to state that you're as fresh as if you had not for six months kept store by a red stove. But what about the crackers and plug tobacco, and the little pad and roller with which you force the boys to damp the stamps?"

"We are civilizing our customers. Some at first inquired what the thing was for, and one, when informed, wanted to *lick* a row for me and beat the blame machine. However, now the boys are plowing, none has time to ride across to the settlement, and a store clerk is entitled to a holiday. I'm at Martha Hope's, and I borrowed Adam's horse."

"It's plausible," said Bob. "You are not forced to account for looking me up. But shall we go to the Cave? Since Christmas morning you have not been underground."

He thought Ruth's eyelids flickered, and perhaps a touch of color flushed her skin. For all that, her voice was calm.

"But for your friendly house I might have gone underground for good. If you like, I will help you cook supper, as I did another time. And I think I'd sooner walk to the house."

Bob nodded. The horse was a rather light plow horse, and willingly carried his load, but one's first ride after a long interval is not altogether a joyous excursion. He thought her cramped, and when she slipped from the saddle she slipped into his arms. He wanted to kiss her, but he swung her lightly to the grass.

"As a rule, a farmer uses a rig, but sometimes, when

"I do get on a horse, I feel I can't get down," he said.

Ruth admitted his apology was plausible.

"As a rule, a store clerk uses her feet; but I believe one ought not to explain."

"Yes," said Bob, "sometimes you get entangled. An explanation and an alibi must be altogether logical and sound. I imagined mine was so. But I'll lead the horse."

He seized the bridle, and the oxen ponderously followed them to the house. Ruth heard their feet in the grass, and she turned her head and laughed.

"The dears! They want to join the group. Well, to know two large, stanch animals guard your sleep must be rather nice. A good dog might do so instinctively, but I expect to teach an ox is hard."

"A woman generalizes from single instances," said Bob. "Because, for once, you thought me asleep, you argue that I am, as a rule, asleep when you are not about. The argument isn't logical, and if you had driven oxen, you would know they like to stop and contemplate anything they think unusual. Twenty minutes since you roamed the plain in the sun. Suppose I claimed you always took a holiday when the afternoon was fine?"

"Then you would be ridiculous," Ruth rejoined. "If you doubt it, you might study the post-office and the store. You perhaps don't know our sales have gone up by thirty per cent?"

Bob smiled. Ruth liked to banter him, but he remarked a note of pride. However, when, for the most part, one's customer's had no money, to push up one's sales might be rash.

"The proper time to boast is when the boys meet their bills."

"That is so," Ruth agreed. "We wait until the bills—five-dollar bills and so forth—are at the bank. You see, remarkably few people are so poor that they cannot find fifty cents for an article they like. A man storekeeper imagines that all a settler needs is food, tobacco, and tools. He doesn't reckon on the women, and he perhaps does not know the things we really need are not the things we would soonest buy. Then, where a settler is married, his wife keeps the purse, and she can sometimes be persuaded to speculate in inventions that cut down domestic chores."

"Oh, well, one finds out one's talents by experiment and I expect twelve months since your ambition was not to be a saleslady. Still, when you think about it, to tempt people to be extravagant is immoral. All traders, perhaps, are immoral, particularly Mr. Harmon."

Ruth frowned, and her mouth went tight. Bob had not known her look like that before.

"I believe Miss Harmon hates me. She has tried to hurt me, and there is no use in pretending that she did not. In a way, it's humiliating. The girl is raw; she is really a savage, but on the plains my supposititious advantages do not weigh for much. Well, I admit we are equal, but I claim my equality."

Bob nodded. He thought Ruth's claim modest, but, from one point of view, she was accurate. In the Northwest one, so to speak, was but naked flesh and blood, and sometimes cultivation, like fashionable clothes, was rather an embarrassment. A man, at all events, stripped for a race and a fight. Since Bob imagined Miss Harmon had inherited her father's talents, she might be an awkward antagonist. Yet Ruth was thoroughbred, and one knew the thoroughbred's speed and pluck.

"I dare say all nice people hate to be hated, and on the whole, I do not think I am nasty," she resumed. "But I will not be insulted by Harmon's girl, and if she will not leave me alone, she must be punished. Then I do not suppose you would like to see Harmon break Mrs. Olsen. One must use the tools and talents one has, and we have begun to attract his customers, the useful sort, who do pay their bills. I hope soon to attract some more. Although you think storekeeper's tricks immoral, I shall use all I imagine will help us baffle the greedy brute."

"I like your pluck, and I wish you luck," Bob remarked.

He put the horse in the stable, and Ruth helped him cook supper. By and by she brushed some flour from her hands, and he saw the stuff was sprinkled in her hair. Ruth, perhaps, did not know, but he thought her like the portrait of an eighteenth century lady he had once admired. She had all the lady's charm and something of her dignity. An impulse to put his arm round her carried him away, but a large kettle was in his other hand, and when he thought to put it down Ruth pushed him back.

"Oh, be careful, Bob! You were going to dump the kettle in the baking pan!"

"I'd rather like to fire it through the window," Bob rejoined.

Ruth laughed, and saw on his blue shirt the print of her hand.

"Glass is expensive, and if I thought myself logical, I would not be annoyed with the kettle. The flour will brush off."

"The kettle did annoy me, and I do not want to brush off the flour. If you like, I'll wear it for your badge and set off, on board a plow horse, to challenge Harmon

and all the powers of greed and so forth behind the swine. But in order to be heraldic, I suppose the hand ought to be red. Ulster's badge. Once I disputed with a rather drunk Orangeman, and I admit for a day or two afterwards——"

"I don't know if you ought to boast about your exploits," Ruth remarked. "However, you are breaking fresh ground and I suppose you mean to sow a large crop. Will you not need help? Do you expect Mr. Lucy to rejoin you?"

She leaned against the table, a yard or two off, and Bob wondered whether she knew why the kettle had annoyed him. When she stopped his advance, her touch was swift and not remarkably light. Anyhow, the moment when something might be risked was obviously gone.

"Bellinda reckons not, and his last letter states he thinks about enlarging his milk round. He's plausible, and salesmanship, so to speak, is a natural gift. An American I met declared that the proper test for a drummer was to start him off with a load of fragrant fish. All the same, ability of the sort is not moral."

"You said something like that before, and I am a saleswoman," Ruth rejoined. "I think you might lift the frying-pan and put fresh wood into the hole."

Supper was a lengthy function, for Ruth bantered Bob, and when she had beaten him in humorous argument, he for a moment or two soberly studied her.

"I hope you will not be vexed, but although at the beginning one remarked your Old Country charm, you have now a sort of sparkling confidence that's Canadian, and new," he said. "When you thought me asleep you declared ironically that men must work. When one

studies you, it does not look as if women were forced to weep."

"Ah," said Ruth, "when you helped me into your rig one bleak day in the fall, you did not know how near I was to melting in floods of tears! At length, I was at my journey's end, I could go no farther, and I might be an embarrassment to my hosts. I imagine you knew, but you saw the line you ought to take, and you played up nobly. When I look back I feel I must say, Thank you, Bob."

"A good plainswoman looks steadily in front."

"Very well. I have a useful occupation. To know one is useful is very nice, and for me it's something fresh. I must make good. I have rather pushed on Mrs. Olsen, and for her sake I am almost afraid. In a way, we are over-trading, and the risks are large. If the harvest is bad we will be beaten, and Harmon will rule the settlement, but for as long as possible we are going to hold on. Well, the farmers' luck is our luck, and you perhaps can calculate the chances?"

"No," said Bob in a quiet voice. "We bet on the weather, and the risk is incalculable. Nobody can yet reckon the Greenland ice-stream's speed, and fix the great Pacific winds' track. However, you might know the French picture, *The Last Cartridges*. In Canada, the lean years come before the good, for some time Western farmers have fought a losing fight, and now, like the *tirailleurs*, we are pushed back against the wall. Our reserves are gone, our goods are pawned, and if we are beaten, I think the British-Canadian lot is done with."

"The Anglo-Saxon colonist never yet was beaten."


"I don't know. The first Virginians vanished, and some time afterwards another lot melted away at Darien.

We have some useful qualities, but our standard of living is high——”

“Perhaps you are unconsciously humorous,” Ruth remarked. “At all events, I expect our English relations would not agree.”

“The standard’s high by contrast,” said Bob. “The fellow to make good in the wheat belt is the fellow who can go without, and a strong, more frugal race, Quebec-French, Scandinavian, Russian, might thrive where we would starve. We must meet the world’s competition, and the Argentine-Italian *peon* and Hindu cultivator are not extravagant. However, our luck might turn, and we have stripped for the fight. I am betting my last dollar, and when you look me up another time you will not have much grounds to think me asleep.”

Ruth imagined he had done with the subject, and she smiled.

 “You really were asleep, Bob; but the sun is shining on the Butte and the leaves are opening. Let’s go out!”

At the door she turned, and her glance searched the room. She noted the clothes he had thrown in a corner, and had thought to mend when he had time for chores like that; the gray, crumbling stuff under Lucy’s battered piano was, no doubt, gumbo that had stuck to his boots when the soil was soft. Somehow she was moved.

“If I can get another holiday, I must come across and put things straight for you——”

She stopped, for Bob’s arm went round her, but when she braced herself against him he let her go, and she went to a bench in front of the house. Her heart beat, and she felt her face get hot. Bob’s look was calm.

“When you do come I hope you will not go away,” he said. “If my harvest is good, will you marry me, Ruth?”

"I will not engage——" said Ruth, in a quiet voice. "Then, of course, there's the stipulation. It looks as if your offer stands only if the harvest is good?"

Bob smiled. "That is so, my dear. If I lose this crop, I must start for the Pacific slope and try to hire myself for a sawmill hand or a lumber gang's teamster. You mustn't marry a broken man whose occupation for some time might be to look for a job. It's unthinkable! The proper line, of course, was to wait and see; but I'm flesh and blood, and I wanted to ask you a number of times before."

"I imagine Martha Hope rather thought you ought," Ruth remarked.

Calm cost her something, and she hoped it was hard for him. He was not theatrically passionate, but she knew he thought for her; moreover, she imagined he would always do so. She was moved, but she knew where she must be firm. In the meantime, it looked as if he pondered his reply.

"In the circumstances. I durst not ask," he said. "For your sake, I mustn't admit I ought. Then we are frontier folk, and Old Country rules and conventions have nothing to do with us. All the same, the part I thought my proper part wasn't easy. And when you were daunted by the storm, I wondered whether I could not carry you away."

The blood came to Ruth's skin, but she smiled.

"Perhaps you might, Bob. Since you are fine stuff, you did not try. If it's some comfort, you were rather like a kind, old-fashioned uncle."

"Oh, well," said Bob, "that is something. It looks—as if I played up better than I knew. But, if I'm allowed, I'd like to persuade you I could be a youthful lover."

Ruth stopped him. "In the meantime, you are not allowed. Let's be sober."

"I was certainly not humorous," Bob rejoined.

"Very well. Until you can support a wife, you think you ought not to marry me? I like your fastidiousness, but I cannot stipulate that I will marry you only when you are prosperous. There's another thing, Bob. When I was horribly forlorn Mrs. Olsen gave me a post; she is a dear old thing, and as far as possible I must see her out. I dare say nobody is indispensable, but I am useful, and if I went, Harmon would soon seize the store. Then, since I must be frank, I have some grounds to hate Miss Harmon. In fact, until the harvest is reaped, or, lost, all we must think about is our part in the fight."

"Looks sound, but I doubt if it's possible. I know where my thoughts will be. But somehow I believe the harvest will be reaped. And then?"

"If you are yet resolved, and Mrs. Olsen no longer needs me, I dare say I might be persuaded," Ruth replied. "But I have stopped for some time, and I must go."

Bob went for her horse, and when he put her up he kissed her. Ruth, at all events, did not rebuke him, and for two or three minutes after the horse picked up its rather awkward stride, he stood with his brows knit and his fist clenched. If strain and sweat would help, his harvest was going to be reaped.

CHAPTER XXI

A RICH YOUNG MAN

SPRING swiftly melted into scorching summer, but the season was good, and while the wheat roots yet pushed down into the cool damp, thunder rains refreshed the parched surface soil. The lengthening days were all too short for the prairie farmers. Artificial grasses were not sown, and when the seeder and land-packer were done with, the plain must be searched for sloos where the melted snow had drained and the natural grass grew long.

Hope, one summer day, loaded fragrant grass in his wagon. The stuff had dried fast, and was rather green than yellow; he knew it good feed, and when he lifted a forkful the smell of peppermint floated about. Mrs. Hope, on the wagon, spread and trampled down the load. Her skin was brown, and her printed cotton clothes had faded in the sun. Hope's blue shirt was neatly patched between the shoulders by material cut from a cotton flour-bag. A patch on his overalls had torn from the older fabric, and when he swung up the hay Mrs. Hope saw his white skin. It implied a fresh job for her, and the jobs that waited were already plentiful.

"Getting tired?" he said, and threw the hay at her feet. "Before we stop we might work along to the end of the row."

"And then begin another? Before I started, I washed some clothes and put four days' supply of bread to bake. I cannot pretend I'm fresh."

"Stay with it, Martha; we'll soon be through," Hope rejoined. "But watch out you don't go overboard. I have got to move the team."

The horses tossed their heads and scattered a hovering swarm of flies, the wagon lurched ahead, and for a few moments Mrs. Hope looked about. By the bluff a hundred yards off, trembling shadows splashed the grass, but where the trees stopped, it rolled with silvery reflections in the wind. Round, white-edged clouds, trailing swift shadows on the plain, advanced across the sky. In the afternoon they might get darker and break in thunder rain. All she saw moved, the picture throbbed, and she sensed a sort of dynamic force. Only in Indian summer are the plains, for a few weeks, tranquilly serene.

At the end of the row Hope helped his wife down and went for some dead branches he had cut in the bluff. Mrs. Hope loosed the team and put out their frugal lunch, and when they had brewed some tea they sat down in the wagon's shade. The wood-smoke tossed about, and the horses, coming back from a pond, pushed into the vapor where they might cheat the flies. By and by Latimer rode up and stopped his horse. His saddle was a wheat-bag, and where his leg had chafed the animal's side its hair was soapy white.

"Light down and take a drink," said Hope. "If you had come along ten minutes since, you might have got some lunch."

"If I'd arrived two days since, I'd have mown the sloo," said Bob. "I dare say I can find another, and I got some food before I pushed off. However——"

He swung his leg across the horse's back, and something cracked and tore. Bob pushed his hand behind him.

"I thought my last button had vanished; but I expect

it's the consequence of washing my old shirt. Sometimes drastic cleanliness is extravagant."

"Which is the consequence?" Hope inquired.

"Adam likes to be accurate," Mrs. Hope remarked. "But you need not bother. Your habit is to walk *breast forward*."

She laughed. The proper line was to joke, but her emotions were mixed. Although the Canadian custom was to throw worn-out stuff away, Adam must stick to his shabby clothes as long as the material would carry a patch, and if one were curious, she imagined one could see some part of Latimer's back. He tied his horse, and when he had drained a can of tea they began to talk about the weather and the crops.

Summer had begun auspiciously. The wheat had sprung soon and its strong, dark color promised a good crop. Before the frost moisture vanished, the thunder rain-storms fell. After harvest was the time to boast, but it looked as if one, at all events, might hope. By and by Martha turned her head. A rig crossed a spot where the ground rolled, and for a few moments the horses and the group on board were distinct.

"Leslie's driving team," she said. "I wonder who hired him, and where they are going."

"Two are women," Hope remarked. "He is steering for the sloo."

They watched the advancing rig, and Mrs. Hope's interest changed to puzzled surprise. The women were fashionable, but she thought she knew the man, and at length she jumped up excitedly.

"It's *Tony Mellish*! He is looking for us!"

Leslie stopped his horses and a man got down. He was rather a handsome young fellow, and Hope noted his

expensive Panama hat and spotless summer clothes. Adam thought his companions the sort of young women one might meet on Sherbrook Avenue, Montreal. One opened a ridiculous little parasol at the end of a long handle like a French marquise's cane. Latimer removed his battered hat, but he did not get up, and he studied the group with a touch of dry humor. He reckoned he knew the strangers' type, and comparison was supposititiously invidious. In the meantime, Mrs. Hope gave Mellish her hand.

"I suppose I'm not dreaming, Tony? I imagined you in London, or perhaps at work in a Parisian *atelier*. But is the famous portrait painted?"

Mellish laughed. "The picture will not be painted, and the pure Greek head will not be carved by me. When we last talked about it, I believe I had not fixed which I'd undertake; but I yet think my modeling was not altogether bad. Anyhow, my wife and my relations think I am more usefully occupied; but she would like to meet you and your husband."

He presented Mrs. Hope and Adam. Latimer, sitting in the grass, his back against the wagon-wheel, thought the lady languidly polite. She, at all events, did not get down, and when she was forced to turn her head maneuvered the ridiculous parasol between her face and the sun.

"Tony was resolved to look you up, and when we inquired at the post-office we found out where you were," Mrs. Mellish remarked. "My sister and I are going on to Victoria, but Tony must transact some business at the settlement, and might stop for two or three days. We are at the hotel, and should be happy if you will dine with us, although I doubt if we can get a private room, and I cannot state that our breakfast was good."

Hope refused, on the grounds that a prairie farmer must stay with his job. He stated that he frankly dared not invite Montreal ladies to dine with him; but he asked if they would get down. Mrs. Mellish thought not, and her sister agreed. They had picnicked by a bluff, and in the shade were horribly bothered by the flies, but when one was not moving, to front the sun was impossible. In the circumstances, Mrs. Mellish would sooner resume the drive, and if Tony wished to stop, come back for him in half an hour. Mellish declared he was resolved to stop, and signed Leslie to start his team.

"It is pretty hot," he said, and Mrs. Hope wondered whether he apologized for his wife. "In August Montreal is as hot as Paris, but our houses and offices are thick stone, and on the open plain the July sun is almost too much for city folk. However, Mr. Hope was smoking, and I have some American cigarettes. The only tobacco one can get west of Toronto seems to be the tin-flag plug."

"In London you smoked cigarettes from Paris, and the tobacco was black and bitter," Mrs. Hope remarked. "You can get stuff very like it in Quebec."

Mellish smiled. "That is so. In North America, I find I'm more North-American than I at one time thought possible. It's important, ma'am."

"I rather think I see. You accept the American tradition; a man ought to have a useful job?"

"The rule is a pretty good rule," Hope observed soberly.

"Certainly," said Mellish with a queer smile. "In Montreal, and I expect in New York, the tradition is: a job is useful only when you can reckon the reward in money." He turned to Mrs. Hope and resumed, as if he

apologized: "Like a good Canadian, I swallowed the whole hog."

Mrs. Hope gave him a sympathetic glance, and presented Latimer.

"Bob is as polite as another; he'd have got up if he durst," she said.

"Although you hold on to it as long as possible, a blue shirt does not last forever," said Bob. "We are modest about our poverty, but we mustn't pretend we are rich."

He took a cigarette, and Mellish turned to Mrs. Hope.

"I found out that you were married, and when business called me to Assiniboia I inquired for your farm. You perhaps know my uncle is dead, and I inherited?"

"I did not know. When he died, I suppose you were forced to choose: whether you would study art for art's sake, or help develop, and exploit, Canada's natural resources?"

"Something like that. The trustees and lawyers thought the house could not be profitably wound up. The old fellow had planned for the future, his investments matured slowly, and so forth. Somebody must carry out his schemes, and it looked as if I was the proper man. Well, Blanche was ambitious for me, and I had begun to find out I had rather a taste than a talent for art."

"I found out sooner. For a time it hurt," Mrs. Hope remarked.

Mellish's look got thoughtful, and his nod was sympathetic.

"Yes; one hates to quit, but after all there is not much use in following an illusion. Then my fresh career rather attracted me. I mustn't claim my uncle was romantic, and he certainly did not. All the same, the old fellow had long views and, in a sense, he thought Imperially.

At London, they begin to beat the Imperialistic drum; at Ottawa, we, at all events, admit Western Canada ought to be Anglo-Saxon. Once or twice, North America might have been Latin."

"That is so," said Hope. "It looked as if the Louisiana French might seize the Mississippi-Missouri line, and the Quebec *coureurs* come down by Lake Champlain and freeze out the New Englanders. Mexican Spaniards pushed east to Kansas. The Hudson's Bay factors were Scots, but their trappers were half-breed French, and for a time Louis Riel was boss by the Assiniboine. I have a sort of notion the Quebec *habitants* might some time move West. They're industrious, hardy and frugal, and their children swarm. Then they are stanchly Canadian, and if they beat us economically, we'd be done for."

"Your business is to hold the fort. As far as it is possible, Montreal merchants and bankers will see you out."

"I wonder," said Mrs. Hope. "We have some grounds to feel we would sooner the traders left us alone. But did business call you to Glencoyne, Tony?"

"My uncle was persuaded the West would presently forge ahead. He believed branch railroads would open the back blocks for cultivation, and talked about digging irrigation ditches across the dry plains."

Hope looked up, rather sharply. Latimer signaled him, and said: "The Government's colonization schemes do not encourage the speculative buying and holding up of land."

"To some extent, they do not," Mellish agreed. "You can, however, buy railroad land, and you, so to speak, can pick up improved farms. Well, Harmon, the storekeeper,

was a sort of agent for us, and when I planned my Western tour, I thought I'd consult with him."

For a moment or two the others were quiet. Hope's mouth set grimly, and his wife's look was disturbed. Latimer admitted surprise that was queerly mixed with amusement and relief. For some time he had imagined a sinister force working behind Harmon, but Mellish certainly did not fit the picture. The young fellow sitting in the grass was not at all daunting, and Bob did not think him much of a force.

"I agree with Mrs. Hope; we would sooner be left alone," he said. "I doubt if the merchants can help us, and on the whole we are not worth exploiting."

Mellish gave him a puzzled look.

"I expect you know Mr. Harmon. Might I ask what you think——?"

"Mr. Harmon is well known," said Bob. "He's industrious, rather remarkably competent, and, like the recent head of your house, I imagine he looks ahead. I could tell you more about him, but I dare say I'm prejudiced, and one mustn't be libelous."

"You imply that he is not a favorite?"

Hope turned to Mellish with a grim smile. His wife signaled him to be quiet.

"The rig will soon be back for you, Tony, but if you can take supper with us at six o'clock tomorrow, Adam and Bob will tell you something about wheat-growing in the Glencoyne district. I durstn't ask Mrs. Mellish, and after supper you will understand why I hesitate."

Mellish agreed, and sensing Hope's reserve, began to talk about something else.

"When I inquired for you at the post-office, I got a sort of shock. Ruth Allen was cutting bacon for a farm-

er's wife. Canadians profess to be democratic, and in the golden days when we were artists we thought social distinctions a joke. But Ruth, behind a counter, at a forlorn settlement store!"

"Glencoyne is our capital," said Bob. "Did you think Miss Allen embarrassed, or apologetic?"

"I did not. For one thing, Miss Allen is thoroughbred. All the same, when she declared she liked her post, I thought it strange. In fact, I wondered whether I might not ask Harmon——"

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Hope. "Your object is good, Tony; but sometimes to meddle is rash. Besides, a Montreal merchant ought to be discreet."

Mellish pondered. Bob thought him one who liked to be generous; he might perhaps like Ruth's promotion to mark his importance, but his wife was perhaps the obstacle. Bob had studied Mrs. Mellish, and he doubted if she would approve. At all events, Mellish let it go.

"Oh, well," he said, "when Ruth stated that Ted Waring was a Mounted Policeman, I was entitled to think it a joke. However, a year or two since, I did not imagine I would be the head of a merchant house."

By and by the rig came back, and for a few minutes Mrs. Hope and Mrs. Mellish conversed politely. Then Leslie started his horses, and Martha resumed her seat in the grass.

"I suppose Tony is rather a rich young man," she said. "He means well, he's kind, and if the impulse seized him, he might be theatrically noble; but he's not at all the sort to take the hard road. In fact, Tony's trouble is, he soon gets tired. He's a musician, something of a painter, and his modeling was really good. I believe he might have been a sculptor. All the same, he hated to study, and

when he inherited his uncle's fortune, I expect he was satisfied to be rich; but Mrs. Mellish had perhaps something to do with it. What did you think about her, Bob?"

"She is beautiful. I reckon she's ambitious, and she might be resolute."

"You know where to stop. I imagine she will steer Tony firmly along the path in which she thinks a Montreal merchant ought to walk. And she will not allow him to be romantically extravagant. To be the center of an exclusive social circle is, I believe, expensive. However, you must come across to supper and support Adam."

"I want you," said Hope. "If Mr. Mellish wishes to know how farming is carried on in Assiniboia, we'll enlighten him. And if he inquires about Harmon, I'm not afraid to be libelous. In the meantime, I have got to clean up this sloo, and you want to look for another."

Bob nodded, and got on his horse. Hope harnessed his team, and in a few minutes he and Mrs. Hope were again at work.

CHAPTER XXII

THE EASY LINE

SUPPER was over and the evening got cool. After thunder rain at five o'clock, the northwest wind had dropped, and thin white clouds floated in the tranquil sky. The damp soil smelled, and Mellish noted the haunting fragrance of wild peppermint. Hope's small house was yet almost insupportably hot, and the group occupied the veranda in front. Mellish noted the dark-green oblong of wheat, the paler oats, and the chocolate-brown fallow; and then the long, receding plain. In summer, at all events, the Northwest was a splendid, spacious country; but when Mellish turned to his hosts his look was embarrassed.

Since Mrs. Hope carried off the supper plates he had questioned her husband and Latimer and weighed their replies. Hope's were perhaps as frank as politeness allowed, and Martha had supported him by some illuminating tales. Latimer struck a sort of humorously philosophical note; Mellish imagined he did not mean to be nasty, but sometimes his humor stung.

Anyhow, Mellish had learned much about the economics of prairie farming, and the Anglo-Saxon's ability to carry a load. Tony himself was Canadian, and sprang from pioneer stock, but he did not see himself living and sweating like a Chinaman for one chance in fifty of making good. It looked as if the Assiniboine farmers were willing to do so, and he liked their pluck. At one time, he had, rather carelessly, studied art, and he wondered

whether he could yet model a lean indomitable frontiersman and his plough oxen. The group's proper title would be *Labor vincit*.

But there was no use in being romantic. Sometimes labor did not triumph, and the laborers went broke. But the phrase was not quite accurate. They were rather broken, and Hope declared they were exploited by greedy city folk.

"I admit you have drawn a disturbing picture," Mellish said. "Since our house is interested in one or two land schemes, it bothers me. But do you think you at all exaggerated?"

"Not consciously," Bob replied.

"I did not," said Hope. "In fact, I tried to remember you were Martha's pal. Anyhow, interest's ten per cent, and where the farm is plastered the creditor cannot lose. Your luck must be very good before you can break a strangle-hold like that."

▶ "After all, the storekeepers and mortgage jobbers cannot force you to borrow."

"Sometimes you are tempted, and tricked. At the beginning, all's made easy."

"But from a city man's point of view, the quarter-section farmer is hardly worth exploiting."

"We are rather numerous, and although the farmer may be forced to quit, the work he has done stands," said Bob. "He has helped support the settlement store, the implement yard, the blacksmith's shop, and so forth. In consequence, the settlement grows, somebody runs a stage from the dépôt, and then the railroad builds a branch line. Where transport's easy people go, and land gets dearer. In the meantime, the real estate merchant has seized and holds the farms."

"Then, if *you* could hold on, you could sell for a just price?"

"That is so," Hope agreed. "If we got one bonanza harvest, we would not be keen to sell; if we got two, I reckon we'd hold on for good. The jobber's plan is to freeze us out before the tide does turn. When he must auction the homestead, he himself buys in while nobody yet wants the place. Since we believe the tide must turn, the scheme is a pretty good business proposition. The farmer sweats for you and pays you ten per cent. When he can't pay, you fire him, and if you wait for a year or two you get back a much larger sum than you lent."

Mellish frowned. He was not greedy; when he started on his business career he had thought he might be a useful citizen. In Montreal merchant speculators talked about the development of Canada's virgin West, but it looked as if the lean frontiersmen met the bill. All the same, his house was a respectable house, and its recent head a respected gentleman.

"Harmon is our agent. I suppose you do not imply that his transactions infringe the homestead laws?"

"Not so far as I know," Bob replied. "I doubt if they're *equitable*; but equity is a subject about which lawyers and debtors might not agree."

Mellish turned to Mrs. Hope, but his gesture included the group.

"I have got something of a jolt. I believe I do not cheat, and on the Montreal market my uncle's word went. After all, one is entitled to take interest for one's money, and to buy land and goods one hopes to sell for a larger price."

"It's obvious, Tony. I suppose something depends on how you buy."

"Well, if my agent is unjust, I'm accountable. I have engagements at Regina and Medicine Hat, and must push on West; but before I start, I will see Ashton and the other fellows you talk about, and if they have a just grievance, I'll try to put all straight. One mustn't be theatrical, but I want nothing that isn't really mine. Now I must thank you for your hospitality, and if, as I expect, I am back in the fall, I hope your husband and Mr. Latimer will reckon me a friend."

Hope went for Mellish's horse, and when his guest was gone, remarked: "The fellow means well. Do you think he'll stay with it?"

"I wonder?" said Mrs. Hope. "At one time Tony was generous, but he was not yet rich, and he had not married a fashionable wife. If our tales have touched his emotions, he might be moved to a noble gesture. For all that, Tony's impulses do not carry him far, and Harmon is cunning and quite unscrupulous. Then I rather think Mrs. Mellish might be an obstacle."

Mellish, riding back to Glencoyne, pondered moodily. He had, as he had frankly admitted, got a jolt. He suspected his talents for business were not remarkable, but since he had studied the heads of one or two Montreal merchant houses, he was not much disturbed. He was willing to learn, and so long as one had a competent manager and agents, to superintend was not hard. All the same, one was accountable for one's servants.

He had not won fame as an artist, and he must, if possible, make his mark in commerce, particularly since Blanche and her relations judged a man's abilities by the money he earned. He loved his beautiful wife, and liked to see her dominate the circle in which they moved, but social triumphs were expensive, and sometimes her cal-

culating hardness jarred. Then, if one thought about it, circles like theirs revolved; one came back to the point from which one started. Before he married he saw himself push ahead across the horizon.

Mellish smiled, a rather bleak smile. It was done with, and he was the beautiful Mrs. Mellish's husband. After all, that was something, and he wanted to indulge her, but he hoped he was an honest Imperialist. Canada needed population and he had undertaken to help sober industrious settlers colonize the lonely West. Anyhow, when he first got to work, it had looked like that.

Now he doubted, but he certainly was not going to exploit poor folk. Sooner than seize the reward for which settlers like Hope and Latimer pinched and labored, he would himself front poverty. He mustn't get theatrical, and when he reflected, he had not much ground to think Blanche willing. Moreover, he did not yet properly know his job, and he must not allow himself to be carried away. Hope and Martha were sincere, but they saw the thing from their point of view, and there might be another. Anyhow, before he talked to Harmon he would see Ashton and weigh his tale.

Mellish carried out his plan, but his object was better than his luck. At ten o'clock in the morning, Ashton mended the corral fence behind his house. He had gone three or four miles for birch posts, but when he cut their points he nicked his axe. To rub out the notch by hand might occupy him for an hour, and his grindstone had split in the frost. The morning was hot, and to drive a three-inch fence-post, particularly when the point is thick, is a strenuous job. Then he needed another man to fasten the wire he stretched, and sometimes the old, borrowed strainer's jaw let go.

Ashton reflected that but for Harmon's greediness, he might have bought another grindstone and engaged expert help. Moreover, the fellow was really accountable for Jane's vanishing. For her sake Ashton had mortgaged his farm. He had bartered his independence for some groceries and salt pork, but Jane was gone. His house was bleak and lonely, and he wanted her back. Then Jane was not remarkably competent, and might be forced to undertake some laborious underpaid job. Tom refused to admit that she might be dead.

Well, if she did come back, he must be at the homestead. Harmon should not take the farm; somehow he must baffle the swine, and a first-class harvest would help. In the meantime, every cent he was not forced to spend must go to a sinking fund that might at length pay off his debt. For example, although to stretch barbed wire was a job for two men, he himself must fix the treacherous stuff.

He heard horses' feet and wheels. Somebody was going to the settlement. Well, if the fellow had time to loaf about the poolroom and bet ten cents on a game, Ashton had not, and he certainly had not ten cents to squander. He might stop the fellow and ask him to help, but if he did so the other might stop for dinner, and he daren't risk it. Since he hated to be shabby, he hated Harmon worse.

The wire was tight, and the strainer against the post. Ashton tried to steady the tool against his bent arm while he took a staple from his mouth and pulled the hammer from his belt. The clamp let go, the wire twanged, and shot back like a released spring. Ashton swore and twisted a soiled handkerchief round his torn hand. Then he turned and saw a stranger stop Leslie's team a few yards

off. The fellow's summer clothes were good, his hat was obviously expensive.

"Your luck was bad, but you need another man, and I expect your tools are not first class," he said.

His fastidious neatness annoyed Ashton. If the city drummer thought to sell him some useless article, he was a fool. Besides, when one talked one could not work.

"When you are a prairie farmer, you must use any old tool you can get. I have all the household truck I can pay for, and you needn't bother to pull out your picture book."

Mellish thought the interview had not begun auspiciously, but one must make some allowance for a man who had just torn his hand.

"I am not a traveling salesman, and your friends, Hope and Latimer, thought I might look you up. You are, I understand, a customer at Harmon's."

"If I was not, I'd have sent for the blacksmith to put up the blasted wire, and I might have asked you to get down. Harmon's customers haven't time to be polite; but you might state who you are, and what you want."

"I am Antony Mellish, of a Montreal business and development house, and all I want is five or ten minutes for confidential talk. You see, Mr. Harmon has negotiated the purchase of two or three farms for us."

Ashton frowned. His hand hurt, before the fellow arrived he had brooded about Jane's vanishing, and now he thought he was justified to let himself go.

"In a way, Harmon *stole* the farms. For some time we wondered how he financed his schemes, and we had begun to think somebody hired him to do his dirty work. I suppose you are the man?"

"None of our transactions are dirty," Mellish rejoined. "If I had any grounds to be ashamed of them do you

think I'd have looked you up? To talk at large will lead us nowhere, but if you feel you have been cheated, I'm willing to weigh your claim."

For a moment Ashton hesitated. He almost thought the fellow sincere, but at one time he had thought Harmon honest, and he was not going to trust his smooth-tongued confederate. He pictured all that he and Jane had borne, and passion carried him away.

"From the beginning, I and my 'ort were cheated. We believed your railroad and Provincial Governments' fairy tales. They declared Canada needed colonists, and all willing to work could make good, particularly in the Golden West. I reckon no laborer in the Old Country works as long hours for as small pay as the Assiniboine farmers. You conspired with the steamship companies to dump us on the plains. You wanted to cut wages, and you wanted the money the immigrants brought across. When you got us here, Winnipeg land offices sold us Manitoba sand hills for farms, and the Regina boosters sections where all the water was alkaline. Looks as if exploiting fools was your main industry."

"You are not just," said Mellish. "A workman's pay is double the largest he ever got in England. If a city clerk, for example, buys a farm in the sand belt, he must pay for his folly."

"All were not clerks," Ashton resumed. "I and some more knew our job. If you locate at the proper spot, the soil is all right, and in spite of frost and drought we might have gone ahead, had we been left alone. But so long as we had got a few dollars, the land companies, mortgage jobbers, and storekeepers stuck to our track. When they had stripped us, they wanted the farms we had im-

proved. Well, I can yet pay the interest, and I hope to baffle the bloodsucking gang."

The blood leaped to Mellish's skin. His object was good, but he had had enough, and there was no use in his trying to reason with a fellow like that.

"I had hoped we might talk about your grievance, and perhaps see a plan to satisfy you. Since you have not begun to do so and I'm accountable for my agents only, I will not stop."

"You were not invited to stop," Ashton rejoined. "Get off my farm."

He resumed his fencing. Mellish started his team, and when he reached Glencoyne consulted for some time with Harmon in the office behind the store. Harmon was persuasive and, for once, urbane, but Mellish was not satisfied. He sensed the fellow's cleverness, and, although he pretended to be frank, imagined he kept something back. For all that, he knew his customers and Mellish did not; moreover, if most of them were like Ashton, to agree with them might be hard. Mellish was stopping for two or three days, and he might again look up the Hopes, and make a few cautious inquiries at the settlement. When he got up, Harmon leaned against his desk, and, pushing back his hat, gave him a friendly smile.

"The boys got a square deal, Mr. Mellish. They are up against the weather and if she freezes sooner than they like, they can't blame you and me. You don't know all the circumstances, and if you butted in, you might make trouble."

"I am not remarkably afraid of trouble," Mellish rejoined. "Where one runs a risk the profit ought to be larger. For all that, one must be just, and I cannot agree to break a man who is honestly trying to pay his debt."

"Sure you would not. I guess one or two are not trying hard, and when they think they're beat they'll move their stuff and quit. Anyhow, you better let things go until you're back in the fall. Then we'll see what the harvest's like and know where we stand."

Mellish went off, and Harmon's smile vanished. Pearl, coming in, noted his frown.

"Looks as if you worried, Pop," she said.

"I'm not quite happy," Harmon agreed. "If the young fella' was all a fool, I'd know how to handle him, but he's keener than you might think. Talks about making things easier for the boys who are trying to pay! If I let one fellow off, none of the gang would pay. Bunk of that sort don't go at the Harmon store."

Pearl knew her father, and imagined he was not altogether frank. Since he was disturbed, he had some other grounds than those he stated.

"You don't want Mr. Mellish stopping around and asking questions? Well, Mrs. Mellish was in this morning, and she's coming back to look at the Indian buckskin goods Wilshaw brought us. If you are about, you might get a word with her, and I guess she wouldn't encourage her husband in any foolishness that might spoil good business; but you'd want to be cautious."

Harmon agreed. He had studied Mrs. Mellish, and she must not think him afraid to allow her husband to pursue his investigations. He, however, was afraid, and something must be risked, and when Mrs. Mellish examined the ornamented buckskins he maneuvered her into his office and used all the tact he could command.

In consequence, when Mellish talked to his wife about his responsibilities she was not sympathetic. After all, she reminded him, he had not been trained for a com-

mercial career, and he had but recently begun to use control. He ought at first to go carefully, and since Harmon knew the people with whom he dealt, for a stranger to meddle might be rash. Then she was going to Victoria and he to Medicine Hat, and if he went by her train, he could see she got a corner seat in a Pullman and the sleeper berth she liked. Railroad conductors and porters were an independent lot.

Mellish hesitated. On the whole, he thought he ought to stop, but his habit was to take the easy road. Then in the morning a letter calling him to Regina sooner than he thought arrived, and he and Mrs. Mellish started for the West. He soothed himself by reflecting that he would be back at Glencoyne when the wheat was ripe.

CHAPTER XXIII

WILSHAW GOES EAST

AT A SPOT on the wheat belt's western edge, where the plain gets higher and the rainfall light, Wilshaw and two more laboriously dug a well. The farm was large, the wheat ripened fast, and at length the crop was good, and the farmer knew he must clear off as many chores as possible before harvest began. He was at one time an Ontario bushman and was not fastidious, but his wife had bothered him about the well. She was from the cities and declared she hated to use water that tasted of drowned gophers and medicinal salts.

As a rule, an old-type Ontario farmer is not an easy boss, and the evening was very hot. Moreover, mosquitoes were numerous, and Wilshaw was but recently released from jail. His leg was yet galled by the shackle to which, when he mended the street of a frontier town, an iron shot was chained, and forced labor had reacted on his native moodiness. The fellow was primitive, and some Indian blood ran in his veins. Although on the trail to the northern woods he had borne all the fatigue a white man can bear, he hated sober industry. His friends knew him stanch, but he was willing to risk much in order to punish a treacherous confederate.

Wilshaw reckoned treachery had sent him to jail. Moreover, now the police had found out the object for his excursions to the woods, his occupation was gone, and they had seized a large part of his stock-in-trade. It looked as if all he could do in Canada was to mend old harness,

but Pete refused. He would sooner try his luck across the United States boundary. Before he started south, however, he had a job at Glencoyne, and since his money was *cached* at the settlement he had engaged to dig the well.

For some distance below the top the gravel soil was loose, but the farmer parsimoniously refused to supply sawn boards for a platform and timbering. They used such stuff as they could cut in a bluff five or six miles off, and if the ground *rushed*, the diggers risked a live burial. Then the niggerhead stones with which they hoped to line the shaft did not all stop where they were built, and one, plunging down, knocked off Wilshaw's hat. His skin was wet by honest sweat, for which he had not, so far, been paid, his clothes were muddy, and some sharp gravel had gone down his back.

Pete began to feel he had had enough. In the well, the light was going, and he imagined they ought some time since to have stopped for supper. A large stone splashed, and the farmer's hired man swore. Plunging gumbo beat Wilshaw's head.

"What are you doing with that bucket?" the farmer, at the top, inquired. "Get to it, and send her up."

"Make your rope fast," said Wilshaw. "I am coming up."

When he reached the top his employer gave him a truculent, inquiring glance. The fellow was muscularly lean and hard; his habit was to get full value for every dollar he grudgingly let go.

"The sun's going down," said Wilshaw. "Maybe your watch is tired. Anyhow I'm stopping. And I want my supper."

"I'll call you when she's ready. You get back and load up that bucket."

Wilshaw went for his coat and pulled out his pipe.

"No, sir. I've been down the blasted hole for 'most ten hours, and I'll take a smoke and wait. If that's not right, I'll take my pay and quit."

"You can quit when you like," said the other. "I pay when the job is through."

Wilshaw's remarks were the sort of remarks a frontiersman does not calmly bear. The farmer was hard stuff, but for him to use his fist was rash. Wilshaw, to begin with, used his boot, and he knew something about the Quebec *savat*. In the grapple that followed he used his knees where he thought an upward drive would hurt, and sometimes his teeth. His antagonist was not fastidious, but to some extent he fought like a white man and Pete like a wildcat.

A well-placed kick on his braced leg brought him down, and for a crowded half-minute they rolled about in the grass. When Wilshaw broke away, both were damaged, and the farmer's ear was torn. He was yet resolved to punish the hobo, but he began to think some caution was indicated, and for a few moments they maneuvered. Wilshaw was the younger and faster, and when he resumed the attack his impetuous advance drove the other against the soil they had recently thrown up. Stopped by the bank, the farmer took a smashing knock, reeled backwards across stones and gravel, and vanished on the other side. For a moment Wilshaw dully wondered where the fellow had gone.

Rubbing dust and sweat from his eyes, he got on the bank. The farmer, supported by his hired man, was at the bottom of the well.

"He won't hustle you much for a day or two," Wilshaw remarked. "If I was mean, I'd drop a niggerhead on his face. You don't want to worry. I reckon he was not an easy boss."

"Quit yapping. Get hold of that bucket rope and help me send him up. Then you can beat it for the railroad, or where the —— you like."

Wilshaw thought it strange, but the fellow's sympathy was with his master. Then, he was young and athletic, and by contrast with Wilshaw, fresh. The farmer was not altogether knocked out, for he looked up, and spotting his triumphant antagonist, began to swear.

"I guess I'll let him stop and cool off," Wilshaw rejoined, and retired behind the bank of soil to cogitate.

So long as the bucket rope was not made fast, the hired man would be bothered to help his battered master to the top. The galling thing was, Wilshaw had labored in the muddy hole for pay it looked as if he would not get. The farmer's wife was, no doubt, cooking supper, and Wilshaw wondered whether she could be forced to supply the sum her husband had refused. In fact, he might be justified to demand a larger sum.

On the whole, Wilshaw thought he would not risk it. A double-barreled gun and a Marlin rifle rested on pegs in the kitchen, and the hired man had told him the hard-faced woman could shoot. Pete imagined she might be willing to do so and the prudent line was for him to start for the railroad before the hired man climbed out and informed her where her husband was.

Wilshaw got up. Now a reaction had begun, he knew himself worse hurt than he had thought. The railroad was twenty miles off, he had no blanket, and when he reached the nearest homestead its occupants would have

gone to bed. Moreover, when they got a light and studied him they might refuse to be his hosts.

Taking the trail, he brooded darkly. Not long since he had an occupation with which he, on the whole, was satisfied. His temperament was adventurous, and although he had run some awkward risks the profit was large. Somebody had betrayed him, and he reckoned he knew the man. Pete, perhaps because he had Blackfoot ancestors, thought useful industry humiliating. As a rule, he refused to labor for himself, but to labor for the Government was frankly unthinkable. Yet the police had forced him to do so, with an iron ball chained to his leg. When he was in the woods and the troopers searched for him he was an unscrupulous antagonist, and he had planned to lure two across a frozen river at a spot where the ice was weak. All the same, he did not hate them because they had won.

To stop his smuggling was the troopers' business; they, so to speak, were honest enemies, but a fellow who gave away his confederate was meaner than a skunk. Wilshaw thought he had fixed on the proper animal. Unless a smuggler could trust his accomplices, none could carry on the profitable trade. Pete was not much of a philosopher, but he could see an argument like that.

The evening got darker, and the hot calm fired the mosquitoes' thirst for blood. An eager swarm followed Wilshaw's laborious march, and his hands were savagely occupied slapping his face and neck. Sometimes, when for a few moments he was not bitten, he thought the ominous hum worse than the prick. As soon as he saw a bluff where he might find some dead branches he must make a fire and camp in the smoke. The drawback was, he reckoned the vague black smear between him and the melting horizon was yet three or four miles off.

Wilshaw reached the wood, and when the dry sticks began to crackle, he crouched like an Indian in the stinging smoke. Only civilized white men sit down squarely, and white men whose home for the most part is a camp dislike an upright chair. Pete was not altogether civilized; he had something of the wild animals' instinctive cunning, and as a rule he was rather moved by impulse than reason.

Pondering dully by the fire, he indulged his revengeful passions. When he was strictly questioned by the police and might have given away old Murchison, the Glencoyne hotel-keeper, he had refused. He might have enlightened the police about his letter, but he had not. For one thing, he could not support his statements; but he hated to be mean.

He had money at Glencoyne; but the sum was not large, and since he needed more, he wondered whether he might not be satisfied to punish his betrayer by a fine. Greed and revenge were nearly balanced, and after a time he let it go. To begin with, he must get to Glencoyne; and throwing fresh wood on the fire, he was soon asleep.

In the morning a farmer gave him breakfast, and then firmly ordered him to push off. In the afternoon he reached a settlement by the railroad-track, and when he had inquired about the trains, went to sleep in the grass at a quiet shady spot. Some time after dark an east-bound freight-train stopped on the side-track, and Wilshaw stole through the gloom by the grain elevator wall. The line was a single line, and the train must wait until the Montreal express was gone.

Wilshaw stood flat against the iron wall. Two hundred yards off the rails sparkled and the grass shone like silver in a fan-shaped beam. The light was in front of the big box cars; farther back were some flat cars on which

British Columbian lumber was stacked, and at the end of the long row sparks and thin smoke marked the stovepipe on the caboose. Air-pump brakes were not yet in use, and when the engineer signaled, a freight-train's crew crawled along the roofs and braked the cars by hand. From Wilshaw's point of view, there was the trouble.

If he climbed on the stacked lumber, a brakeman on the roof might spot him and call for help to throw him off the train. He must get inside, or underneath, the cars; but to open the big sliding-doors noiselessly would be hard. Wilshaw found some, that perhaps carried Chinese silk and tea, were sealed; one door not firmly shut jarred harshly in the slides. Then boots rattled on a roof and a man's dark figure cut the sky.

"Nothing's doing, Bud. You can't get on this train, and if you did, you couldn't stay. Since we pulled out from Revelstoke we dumped two bigger men than you."

Wilshaw's impulse was to feel for a hefty lump of ballast, but he reflected that the fellow's partner might not be far off, and a shout would bring one or two more from the caboose. In consequence, he stole away and crawled across the line under the train. His last meal was breakfast, and he had not ventured to ask for another at the settlement. Since news of his exploit at the well might soon arrive, there was not much use in his asking for a job.

While he forlornly pondered, a light advancing from the west grew to a dazzling beam. The locomotive bell began to toll, the cars rolled past and stopped, and Wilshaw found himself between the trains. The station-agent's office and baggage-room were on the other side, behind the Montreal express.

Wilshaw reckoned the passengers had gone to bed. There was not much use in his getting into a vestibule,

because if the conductor was not about, the porter would ask if he had a ticket for a sleeping-berth; but he saw another plan. In summer, an open-sided observation-car was coupled behind the trains, and nobody would use it after dark.

For a minute or two he waited; and then somebody laughed, a jeering laugh. Wilshaw looked up and saw a brakeman on a freight-car roof.

"You there yet? You're surely obstinate, but if you're going east, I guess you got to walk."

The express locomotive snorted and the bell clanged. Wilshaw stooped swiftly and a lump of ballast crashed at the brakeman's feet. Wheels rolled, three or four passenger-cars slid by, and Wilshaw jumped for the observation's hand-rail. His legs went from under him, but his hold was good, and in a moment or two he was safe on board. It looked as if only the brakeman had seen him get up.

A keen wind swept the open car, cinders and gritty dust drifted about, but the train would not stop for thirty miles, and Wilshaw imagined he would not be disturbed. Under a seat was the warmest spot he could find, and since he was not fastidious he was soon asleep.

An hour afterwards, somebody seized his leg and dragged him across the boards. A large baggage-man jerked him to his feet, and the conductor flashed a lantern in his eyes.

"If you had pulled in your boots, you might have stayed on board till sun-up," the railroad man remarked. "I suppose you've got no money to pay for your ticket?"

Wilshaw noted the locomotive's labored snorts. In summer the construction gangs straightened curves and mended the track, and he imagined a foreman had recently

signaled the engineer to slow. A short distance behind the car a pressure-lamp flamed.

"You can search me," Pete replied.

"If I acted by rule, I'd hand you to the police, but I don't know where we'd find them and we're not going to carry you to Winnipeg. Here's where you *get* off. It's safer that way, and she's not going very fast."

Wilshaw saw the implication, and since he must go, he ought to go soon, before the locomotive picked up her proper speed. When the baggage-man pulled back a rail, he went down the steps, fronted the locomotive, and seized the hand-rail. The wind beat his face, and for a moment he hesitated.

"We can't wait," said the conductor. "Start him, Bill!"

Wilshaw let go. His boot struck a tie, for one or two awkward strides, he plunged ahead; and then crashed in the gravel, rolled over, and rolled down a low bank. Two or three minutes afterwards he awkwardly got up. One hand was bleeding and he thought his knee was skinned, but it did not feel as if any bones were broken. The throb of the train and the head-lamps' reflections got indistinct. For all he knew, the nearest settlement was thirty miles off.

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. HOPE AT HOME

SOMETIMES on Saturday evenings Hope did not go to work after supper, and his neighbors, returning from the settlement, stopped for a smoke and to exchange news. Mrs. Hope kept a large coffee-pot on the stove, which was moved to the small veranda, and when mosquitoes were numerous she stretched a curtain between the posts. In summer, the door was removed, and a skeleton frame covered by wire gage and closed by a powerful spring, was hung in its place. When a stranger forgot the spring the frame hit his back and sometimes pinched his heel. A blizzard had broken the veranda roof, and the uneven lapping of the shingles marked Hope's repairs.

About seven o'clock one evening Mrs. Hope and Ruth occupied canvas chairs as far as possible from the stove, which was yet hot. Hope was on the steps and two or three newspapers were scattered about. Latimer stretched his legs across the boards.

"The bench is not harder than usual, Bob," Mrs. Hope remarked. "In the fashionable circles you at one time ornamented, I believe one does not sit on the floor. Perhaps you wanted to be away from Ruth and me?"

"It was not my object, ma'am," said Bob. "After a feast like your supper, one mechanically takes an easy pose, and you ought to know a plainsman uses a chair only when he is forced. All the same, I would not, so to speak, sit on everybody's veranda, particularly when my clothes had recently been boiled."

"I suppose you thought we had not remarked their freshness?" said Ruth. "When a plainsman does boil his clothes, he feels he's entitled to boast."

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Hope, "I boil Adam's. They are a primitive lot, my dear."

Bob grinned. "Woman is domestically progressive, if you see what I mean. When you have dug a well for her, she wants an American washer and a hot-water tap; when she has forced you to buy a nickel lamp, she grumbles that her Toronto friends have gas. A man, where he is left alone, and particularly a plainsman, goes back to the ancestral type. I think the proper word's revert but gardeners call it *sport*. He likes old clothes, and he has no use for chairs. Dirt, in moderation, does not bother him, and he is not, and mustn't be, fastidious about his food."

"And sometimes, like his ancestors, he lives underground. But, if the choice were given you, would you go back to the life you knew in the Old Country?"

"I have not the choice, but I think I would not," said Bob in a sober voice, and, perhaps mechanically, glanced at Ruth. "Although I mustn't claim a plainsman's habit is to stay where he is put, Glencoyne, by contrast with some others, is an attractive spot. Then for four or five years we have put up a stubborn fight, and now I believe we'll win."

Ruth was moved to sympathy. Since the group sat down for supper she had sensed a note of cheerfulness that was something fresh. From the beginning Bob had joked, and sometimes she and Martha Hope had bantered him, but behind all careless talk one sensed a haunting strain. Now the strain was going.

Her glance searched the plain. The sun had not yet set, but in the west the sky was green, and dazzling orange

light pierced the level clouds about the horizon. On high spots, and where the soil was thin, the parched grass reflected the bright beams. In the east, sky and plain were coldly blue but the crops' wide oblong cut the foreground by a belt of harmonious color.

The oats shone with silver and lemon yellow; one could not see their tasseled heads, but one sensed the feathery texture of the mass. Red-gold and copper splashed the wheat's fading green; one knew the stiff ears ripened and the thick stalks would carry a noble load. Ruth thought the standing grain beautiful, but its beauty was not all. It stood for anxious thought and labor. It stood for triumph.

She pictured the summer hailstorm that battered the stalks and cut the tender blades, and the calm nights a week or two since, when all knew the milky, swelling berries might shrivel in the frost. Yet the strong plants had made fresh growth, and the cold had not quite touched the danger-line. Now, for the most part, the risk was gone, and at length, where one had sowed one would reap. The drawback might be to find the help one needed to stook and thrash and haul away the splendid crop. Before the last wheat-bag was at the elevators fall would melt in tranquil Indian summer, and the first snow drift across the grass.

"You are studious, Adam," Mrs. Hope remarked. "Do the newspapers support your rather unusually optimistic views?"

Hope looked up soberly. "Until I have cashed the elevator company's warrants, I'm not going to boast, but I begin to think we have made it. The fellow who writes the Winnipeg market notes knows his business and I've tried to check him up by Montreal and London. Walla wheat's a bumper crop and the Portland fleet will get a

load, but summer was dry in California and the American Middle West. Prices move up at Chicago; Liverpool and Mark Lane are buying ahead. Supplies from countries south of the equator were not up to par, and stocks are running low. Europe waits for Northern wheat, and on the whole the crop is light. You see where it leads? Canada has a bonanza harvest, but she'll get a proper price."

"If we didn't know you for a sportsman and a trusty pal we might think you one of the desiccated mummies who tabulate figures for insurance and railroad offices," Bob remarked.

"They are not all like that," said Hope. "At Montreal I knew an actuary——"

The others laughed, and Bob resumed: "Thank you; I claim my case is proved! You begin to think we have made it? Look at the crop you have grown. Note its shining harmonies in copper, green, and gold. The stuff *flaunts* its splendid color, as if it were proud it had baffled drought and rust and hail, and cheated the frost in fall. Well, we have sweated for it. Our food was potatoes, bannock, and bacon; our drink green tea, alkali water, and gopher extract. In the rains the mosquitoes lived on us; I've strung wire, with both torn hands occupied, while fifty bloodthirsty brutes bored my face and neck. Now it's not important. All that's important is, we have conquered the Northwest, and we have beaten the blasted money-lenders!"

"Looks as if we might," Hope agreed soberly.

Horse's feet beat the turf, and Mrs. Hope turned her head. A horseman pushed through the willows by the creek.

"It's Waring. I expect he will take some coffee, Ruth,

and at length we can be generous with the condensed milk."

Waring got down and drained the cup Ruth gave him. Then, with his hand on his horse's neck, he studied the wheat.

"I hope your luck has turned," he said. "In the Qu'Appelle Valley the oats are stooked, and south by Moose Mountain the binders are in the wheat. Well, the crop ought to help pay off some mortgages and put the boys on their feet."

Hope invited him to stop, but he refused.

"I am carrying dispatches, and I imagine McBride is not far behind," he said with a laugh. "A Hudson's Bay man came down Lake Winnipegosis and brought us a message from some Indians in the wilds. In early spring a buck, moved by domestic jealousy, tried to push another through a hole in the ice. Help arrived, and the fellow took the woods, but he recently came back and shot his rival through the leg with an old H.B. gun. The sachems state he begins to be a nuisance, and since they are not allowed to deal with him by tribal law, they expect us to come up as soon as possible and punish the brute by ours. The old fellows, no doubt, reckoned we would see the joke. The patrol must paddle, and carry, their canoes for five or six hundred miles, and before they get there the rivers might freeze. When they start back, they must drag a hand sledge across snowy rocks, and I hope they will not send me. On the whole, a Mounted Policeman's job is not conspicuously soft."

"Oh, well," said Hope, "you made the rules, and you must play up. Before you meddled, I guess they'd have knocked the fellow on the head and had done with it."

Waring turned to Ruth.

"I hope trade is good at the Olsen store."

"We do not grumble, thank you, and when harvest's reaped, we expect to enlarge our sales. In the meantime, we do not like to lose our old customers, and we have some fresh tobacco I can confidently recommend."

Waring smiled, a rather bleak smile.

"When we were pals in England, I'd have refused to picture your pushing cheap tobacco plugs; but I admit I did not see myself polishing harness and cleaning stable."

"In Canada one does not apologize for being useful. However, I suppose we were pals, and now I'm a saleswoman, I do not think you ought to desert us for the opposition store. It has perhaps some attraction ours has not?"

The blood came to Waring's skin. He was not going to contrast Ruth and Pearl; but he must refuse to state that he had good grounds to doubt Miss Harmon's friendliness, and he had not for some time visited at her father's store.

"One tries to be modest," he remarked. "From a commercial point of view, a policeman is not a useful customer."

"Now you are not very nice," said Ruth. "I did not mean to be nasty, but perhaps I was rash. One, of course, must not advise the Royal North-West."

For a minute or two Waring talked to Hope, and then got on his horse. When he was gone Mrs. Hope gave Ruth a smile.

"In a way, the advice you tried to give was out-of-date. When Waring does go to Harmon's, I expect it's to buy stuff for pals who send him there. At all events, I imagine Miss Harmon firmly turned him down soon after Wilshaw's arrest. Now you can perhaps account for the young fellow's reserve."

"Oh, well," said Ruth in a thoughtful voice, "when you meddle you risk getting entangled; but in England I was his friend, and he did not weigh things. However, my object was good, and I hope he is not very much annoyed."

Half an hour went, and then a rocking wagon crossed the plain. Ashton got down and Mrs. Hope gave him some coffee, which he gulped. She remarked that he forgot to thank her, and when he leaned against the veranda post he frowned.

"Are you or Bob going to the railroad for harvesters tomorrow?" he asked Hope.

"I am going to loaf," said Adam. "I don't reckon to get much rest for the next two months. Then the fellow I had last fall inquired if he might come back. But are you not going, Bob?"

Bob glanced at Ruth, and said he supposed he must. When harvest on the plains was good, the railroad company carried helpers from Ontario at excursion rates. He would soon need a man, but had Mrs. Hope invited him to drive across on Sunday afternoon, he might have waited. She, however, did not, and Ruth was satisfied to give him a baffling smile. Sometimes Bob imagined all she thought about was the Olsen store.

"If you want me to engage a harvester for you, I'm not keen," he said to Ashton. "When he arrived you mightn't like him, and some city slobs come out who do not know a stook from a stack."

"If you'll use my team and bring back the rig after I get down at the station, it's all I want," Ashton replied. "My stuff will not be properly ripe for another week, and just now I feel as if I'd like to burn the lot. I'm going to

Brandon to see a lawyer, and I can't keep the team for two or three days at the livery."

Bob gave him a sympathetic nod. Brandon was not very far off, but one train only went west and another east in the day, and all stopped at every water tank along the line. Then Tom's remark about a lawyer was significant.

"Has Harmon been getting after you?" Hope inquired.

Ashton clenched his fist and his skin got brick-red.

"The swine is trying to seize my farm. We had a dispute at his office, and I've driven straight across. You see, when I gave him the mortgage, our understanding was, so long as I paid the interest he'd leave me alone, but if I liked, he'd take the debt by instalments, and I worked out a sort of sinking fund. Now he declares he knows nothing about it, and if I cannot put up the whole sum, I must go. I claimed he must give me proper notice some time before he can seize, and in the face of his undertaking, the notice wouldn't stand. I believe I'd get some protection by the homestead laws, and, anyhow, the blood-sucker shall not have the crop."

For a few moments the others said nothing. Mrs. Hope imagined the grounds for Ashton's disturbance were deeper than the loss in money it looked as if he must front. Tom yet hoped his wife might rejoin him, and if she did so, he must have a home for her. Ruth had watched with sympathetic interest the farmers' stubborn fight, and since she had helped supply them on better terms than Harmon gave, to some extent their triumph was hers; but when she studied Ashton's stern pinched face the thrill was gone.

Hope's reflections were economically practical. A just storekeeper was a useful man. When wheat was cheap, and crops were spoiled, he helped his customers hold on,

and if one weighed the risk, his reward was not large. Since, in some circumstances, the homestead laws protected stock and goods from seizure, his asking for a mortgage was not remarkable; but on the plains the rule was for him not to claim his debt so long as the interest was paid. Harmon, however, was not just, and if Ashton had not stipulated in writing that he was entitled to renew the mortgage, it might be awkward.

"An argument about a general custom mightn't carry much weight at a law court," Hope remarked. "You borrowed the money for a fixed time. Did Harmon expressly undertake to renew the loan?"

"Certainly. If I gave him a square deal, he'd keep me going; the fellows on whom he shut down had tried to cheat," Ashton replied. "Now he asks if I have a witness to the statements I claim he made. Well, I have a copy of the deed, and some letters. The brute was cautious, but I reckon a competent lawyer might see me out. If he cannot, I'll burn the crop and I'll burn the house. Harmon drove away my wife, he has got my money, and now he has got to stop——"

He turned to Mrs. Hope and resumed: "I have no news of Jane. I durstn't think her dead, and somehow I'd have heard. She might come back, and when she comes she mustn't find I'm gone. And she mustn't roam about with me while I hunt up a fresh job. The tide is turning, and for her sake I am holding on. After harvest, I could pay three or four years' interest, the farm is mine, and a bigger man than Harmon could not shift me."

On the whole, Bob agreed. He was English, and he knew the large stubborn folk whose home is in the bleak Pennine hills. Ashton, standing firmly braced, his fist clenched and his mouth tight, was an awkward antagonist.

Mrs. Hope, however, began to talk in a soothing voice, and by and by Ashton took some coffee as if he had forgot the first lot, and, sitting down on the steps, began to smoke. Mrs. Hope indicated an advancing horseman.

"I must get some 'At Home' cards printed; but Adam might put up a notice at the trail forks, and draw a clock on it."

"A notice would not keep the boys off," Bob remarked. "We are not sophisticated, and there wouldn't be much use in the clock's informing us you were not at home until eight o'clock, if we saw you at seven. In fact, I doubt if we would stop for a fireman's hose."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Hope. "I expect Ruth has something to do with my popularity; but my object was not to keep you off. An industrious housewife cannot receive her friends altogether when she likes."

After a few minutes McBride got off his horse.

"The evening's fine; I reckon the wheat will harden fast," he said. "Ye'll have seen Waring? He's maybe no' far in front?"

"I doubt if you will overtake him," Mrs. Hope replied. "I believe he carried some important dispatches and he was anxious to push on."

McBride glanced at the coffee-pot and Mrs. Hope thought he noted a cigarette end and two or three matches in the grass, where nobody on the veranda could have dropped the articles. At all events, his eyes twinkled.

"And the lad refused to stop? Well, ye have a fine crop, Mr. Hope."

Hope modestly agreed, and for a few moments McBride looked at the wheat.

"I have seen none better, but all is good. Yez fought for it, and some thought yez 'd be broken and scattered

before the good years began. The boys are hard stuff, and the lot from the Old Country are weel to the fore. When yez think about the London clerks the steamship companies dumped. The lads had never held down a plow's nose and could not yoke a horse. They are yet here, and I would say they will stop."

"Some clerks were from Toronto and one or two from Montreal," Mrs. Hope remarked. "However, where all are good, comparison is invidious."

"It's the true word, mistress. Well, the red Fife's a bonnie wheat, but ye'll get better; maybe ye'll get a branch railroad, and elevators at Glencoyne. Some folk we knew were shipwrecked, and the rest were near the rocks; but I'm thinking the tide has turned."

"We begin to be hopeful, but one good harvest does not guarantee prosperity," Hope remarked.

"It cannot be guaranteed. The good and the bad are mixed, but every good year sets ye firmer on your feet."

They talked about something else, and after a time Ashton inquired:

"If you throw some papers in a fellow's face and push him against a desk, is it an assault?"

"He might throw ye down the steps. Are ye for trying it?"

"In England, I believe one form of assault is technical, and the other costs you more," Bob remarked. "I myself know one or two gentlemen I would like to assault, but I cannot be extravagant, and if it cost five dollars, it mightn't be worth while. However, we wait the sergeant's reply."

McBride gave Ashton a queer searching glance.

"Action calculated to provoke a breach of the peace is punishable by fine. Anyhow, if we catch ye looking for

a fight, ye're certainly for the pen. I'd leave it alone, me lad. The drawback to starting trouble is, ye might not stop where ye think."

For a minute or two he talked about the crops, and then got on his horse. Soon afterwards Ashton climbed on board his wagon, and Bob went for his team, but when he came back he led the horses and Ruth walked with him along the dusty trail.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE FRONTIER VEIN

RUTH'S small room at the shingled Olsen store was hot, and although she had gone upstairs she did not go to bed. For one thing, the mail-carrier had arrived late, and for some time afterwards she had been kept busy. Then a letter for herself from England must be pondered.

Moving a chair to the window, she pulled back the gauze insect-bar. The lamp was across the room and the night got cool. She heard a mosquito, but with a swift stroke she crushed the pest, and was afterwards left alone. There was no moon, the days got shorter, and but for the pale stars the night was rather dark. Behind the low roofs at the other end of the street, orange reflections flickered in the sky. Spring was the time for the big grass fires, but Ruth thought this one large.

In two or three open garden lots dusky willows and poplars clustered against the ship-lap walls. Sometimes, for a few moments, the branches tossed, and the leaves pattered as if they were splashed by rain. Ruth smelled burning grass and the dust in the wheel-torn street that the dew began to wet. A lantern glimmered in the livery yard and vanished. Leslie was going to bed, but a window yet shone in the lean-to office built against Harmon's store. Ruth wondered whether he reckoned up his debts and weighed fresh plans for the entanglement of victims whom the harvest might help break his nets.

Ruth, however, refused to speculate about Harmon. She felt the dark and rather forlorn settlement was but a spot in the vast sweep of grass. If one drove south for nearly a day, one reached a similar spot on the railroad; if one went north, there was only grass, tangled pine forest, and tundra marsh between one and the Arctic Sea. Yet, for a sweep of twenty or thirty miles round the compass, Glencoyne was the farmer's social center, and stood for such civilization as was possible on the plains. There was the important thing that Ruth must weigh.

The letter from England offered her not a home but a lodging until she married, and an opportunity to use her charm. Her relations used some tact, but Ruth began to be a plainswoman, and was not afraid to be vulgarly frank. She, and the others, knew she had some charm, and although competition was, no doubt, keen, her luck might be good. Well, the invitation, in order to be helpful, ought to have been sent before, and perhaps her stating that her business was to weigh bacon and tobacco accounted for its, rather late, arrival.

Ruth smiled. If all she wanted was a husband, she might at Glencoyne choose one of two or three, although none was the sort her Old Country friends would approve. Bob, of course, was a better sort than theirs, but he admitted his poverty. In the Northwest, life, so to speak, was naked, and must be fronted starkly. To pretend would not help, and cultivation was perhaps an embarrassment; nothing helped but stubborn pluck and strength to labor. Ruth did not admit she was daunted, but she must ponder, for when one pictured the Old Country the contrast was marked.

Her hesitation was not selfish. When she was forced, she could go without as well as another; for nearly twelve

months she had done so. After all, fashionable clothes, cultivated friends, and so forth, were not of first importance, and passion was not. For a time hectic romance might carry one away. It did not last. Trust and kindness and sincerity stood for all one's life.

To let Bob go would hurt, but unless she could bear the strain and smile, she must not marry him. If she could not help, she must not be an extra load. For example, Ashton was the best farmer at Glencoyne, but he was broken by his wife's incompetence, and she had vanished. Bob thought the load would soon be easier, and when one got richer one could buy mechanical inventions that lightened domestic chores; but he frankly admitted that for a time a frontier farmer's wife would have a strenuous job. Ruth smiled, a gentle, indulgent smile. Although, or rather because, he was her lover, Bob refused to cheat.

The shining window at the Harmon store suddenly went blank, and a queer dull crash inside the building was like a pistol-shot. After a moment or two, a large, indistinct object lurched uncouthly down the steps, and now the door was open Ruth knew the two or three shattering explosions were pistol-shots. Then an unsteady light began to tremble behind the window, and a horse's feet beat the turf. A woman ran down the steps, stopped by the object on the sidewalk, and screamed.

Ruth braced up, and shouting for Mrs. Olsen, sped down the stairs. When she was in the street she saw others ran to the store, but she was in the group that first reached the bottom of the steps. For all the noise of their feet on the boards, she yet heard the galloping horse, and for long the measured drumming haunted her. Leslie firmly pushed her back and stopped the men.

"Quit shoving, boys. He's all in," he said, and signed a

woman in the crowd. "Come on, Mrs. Neil, and take the girl away."

The tossing light in the store was brighter, and when Pearl Harmon got up from the sidewalk the illumination touched her face. Ruth saw the blood had drained from her skin, but her mouth was set in a firm line, and her glance was rather horribly calm. She, perhaps mechanically, yet clutched a large revolver.

"He's dead?" she said, as if she knew, but refused to let hope go.

"Sure," said Leslie; "you have to face it. No use in waiting for the police and doctor; we can't get them for some time, and the store's burning. Lift him, boys, and start for my barn."

Pearl scornfully pushed back a woman who touched her, and seized Leslie's arm.

"You have the fastest horses in the neighborhood. Put a saddle on the brown mare for me, and send Bill and two or three more to search the Walpole trail. The man who killed my father is getting clean away."

Turning her head, she commanded silence by a gesture, and for a moment or two the others listened. But for the snapping of the fire all was now quiet, and Leslie resumed control.

"Carry him to the barn, and tell Bill to yoke and saddle. Come on, five or six of you; we have got to stop that fire, and we'll find tools and buckets in the store. Line up to the well, another gang. You can't have my horse, Miss Harmon, and Mrs. Neil waits for you."

Ruth did not see where Pearl went, because she herself was pushed across the street. Leslie and some more ran up the steps. In the back office the lamp was on the floor, and the flame had run along the oil that soaked

the boards. Papers in an overturned basket and some drygoods and card boxes burned, but the fire had not yet got a dangerous hold. The light from the burning stuff shone into the store, and the group saw the boards were horribly splashed. Where the wet, red trail began a long-handled axe stuck in the wood, and in the doorway some paper money was scattered about.

"Stand back a moment," Leslie ordered. "Before we begin trampling around you want to get a right picture of all you see."

He picked up the paper money, and, pulling out the axe, glanced at the stained blade, and then indicated some others stacked against the wall.

"His own axe. You know the make; they're ground keen before they're shipped. When he was hit, Harmon was coming from the office. Maybe he thought he'd call for help; maybe all he wanted was to get away from the fellow who hit him. Anyhow, he made the door, and then he weakened and pitched down the steps. But the smoke is getting thick and the fire's taking hold. Sling out some spades and pails, and let's get busy."

The store was a general store, and all knew where the goods were kept. Indurated wood-pulp pails and galvanized buckets rattled down the steps, and the crowd in the street broke up the dusty, crumbling gumbo and formed a chain to the well. For about ten minutes Leslie and his helpers in the office were strenuously occupied; and then he leaned against Harmon's broken desk and got his breath. Somebody had got a light and held up the globular lantern.

At one spot, where the matchboards were not charred, a few white splinters marked a small hole in the wall. The floor was covered by trampled mud, and in the large room

singed drygoods, letter-files, account-books and so forth were scattered about in the water that drained to the steps. Where the boards were uneven muddy pools had formed.

"Not much use in the police looking for footprints and fingermarks," Leslie observed with unconscious humor. "Anyhow, we put her out, and I've known a city fire-gang make 'most as bad a muss. Well, some of us might be sent for to take the stand in court, and you want to remember all you saw. Now come on to the yard."

The crowd followed the group along the sidewalk. Leslie was a magistrate, and although he was nothing of a lawyer, and had but once or twice used his powers, his neighbors were willing for him to take control. Two of the men who had carried Harmon kept the door of the livery barn.

"Bill took the trail five minutes since with the trotters," said one. "Edwards went off on the bay horse, and Dean is about ready to go for the police. The girl is at the office with Mrs. Neil. She was storming because nobody would loan her a horse."

"We'll go in," said Leslie, beckoning one or two.

His carriers had put down Harmon decently on some boards, and a tubular lantern hung from a beam. Somehow his stiff pose exaggerated his bulk and muscular strength. One noted his thick arms and arched chest, but his head was inclined awkwardly, and the horrible stain that began near the top of his white shirt suggested why his bull neck no longer supported its load. Leslie moved the handkerchief that partly covered Harmon's face and on one side reached below his collar; and then, rather quickly, pulled it back. The others' look was sternly grim, as if they refused to indulge an instinctive shrinking.

Nothing, however, indicated much sympathy for the object at their feet.

"You know him," said Leslie. "I reckon you see why he died?"

One or two nodded; the queer thing was, Harmon had reached the door. Consciousness was perhaps not altogether banished by the tremendous shock, but perhaps, for a few seconds, his powerful muscles had worked mechanically. None was a physiologist, but all knew Harmon's resolution.

"A full-arm swing," Leslie resumed. "The blade went where she was meant to go. I'd say before the lamp was smashed, and a Canadian used the axe."

On the whole, the others agreed. The long axe is Canada's national tool, and although a stranger after three or four years' practice may chop, an expert must begin when he is a boy.

"What about those bills you picked up?" one inquired.

Leslie pulled out the paper money, and when he had straightened the wet notes, glanced at his stained hands.

"Blood on the money; one or two might think all wasn't his," he said. "Maybe the fellow got some more, but I sure don't see Harmon handing out his wad because a hobo stuck him up. We'll go see if his daughter can tell us something."

Pearl Harmon and Mrs. Neil were in the combined office and workroom. The small, tired woman had rather nobly stuck to her post, but to imagine she comforted or supported the splendid young Amazon was ridiculous. The girl's skin was flat white, as if the blood that the shock had banished had not yet returned, but her mouth was firm and her eyes rather burned than sparkled under her black, knitted brows.

"Edwards pulled me off your horse," she said. "If two or three hadn't got in front, I'd have ridden over him."

"Sure he did," said Leslie in a soothing voice. "When you have told us all you know, you are going home with Mrs. Neil. The job the boys have got is a job for men."

Pearl laughed, a hoarse, jarring laugh.

"If I have to steal a horse, I'm going to take the trail. You're a man and I hadn't thought you a worse fool than some, but when you sent your best horses after the killer, you hitched them to a rig."

"They're trotters, trained to run in double harness," Leslie replied. "Then I don't know if you could reckon on the boys' catching the fella'. Their business is to find his trail, and while one keeps it another will ride for the police. But did you know him?"

"I did not," said Pearl, with an effort for something like calm. "Looks as if he crept in by the door at the back where the woodshed is. I'd gone up to bed, and a few minutes afterwards I heard the boards crack and Pop begin to talk, as if he was surprised or mad. The other's voice was quiet, but kind of threatening, and I thought there might be trouble. When the shot was fired, I was pulling my dress back over my head, and my arms got stuck. I don't know how long I was, tearing at the thing; maybe it was half a minute."

Leslie nodded. At the period, a woman's skirt was rather voluminous, but the waist was small and molded to the body. One could picture the girl's getting entangled by her savage speed; one could not picture her hesitating because she was afraid.

"When I was on the stairs the lamp was smashed," she resumed. "Maybe the oil began to burn the floor; any-

how, light was kind of flickering in the office—I didn't see Pop. The door was open, I felt the wind, and my foot struck a pistol on the boards. A man was stealing across the yard; he knocked a coal-oil can I'd thrown out, and it rang. Somehow I knew Pop was hurt. If he wasn't hurt, he'd certainly be around, but I couldn't see him, and I ran to the window. If I was quick, I might stop the other fellow."

Pearl frowned. It looked as if she brooded, but she perhaps got her breath, for she had talked savagely and fast. Leslie knew the girl, and he did not think her trying to shoot the fellow before she went to look for her father altogether strange. She would reckon her business was to punish his antagonist.

"I was a moment or two shoving up the glass," she said, as if she apologized. "The night was pretty dark and the willows were between him and the sky. I guess he'd tied his horse behind the trees. Well, I didn't get him. How often did I shoot?"

"Three shells were on the floor. Why did you break the gun?"

"It's queer," Pearl said dully. "I suppose I was rattled. I knew where to find ca'tridges, and when you want a gun you want the cylinder full. But it doesn't matter. The fellow got on his horse and I went to look for Pop. The door was open, and I went down the steps. Maybe I screamed, and folks came running. That's all, and now I'm going to get me a horse."

"Well, well," said Leslie, "I don't know if I can stop you; but to carry concealed weapons is against the law, and you'll hand me that gun. Then you want to think about the store."

Pearl got up and gave him a queer, hard smile.

"I don't know where you'd put a big, long-barreled Colt in a woman's clothes. Anyhow, I reckon to carry it in a belt, where it won't be concealed. I'm going, and when the killer's shot or hanged I'll think about the store."

Carrying herself with a touch of dignity, she went off, and when she was gone one of the group remarked:

"The girl's a daisy, but if I was a young fellow I don't know as I'd like her for my wife. And some damfools tell you the proper plan's to treat them rough!"

"Our business is to spot the fellow who killed her father," Leslie rejoined. "Four years I've been magistrate, but it's my first real job, and I have to do the best I can. Well, the fellow knew the door by the woodshed, and he knew where to tie his horse. Doesn't look like a stranger. Harmon wasn't a favorite, but I'd hate to think somebody at Glencoyne used that axe on him. Besides, if he belonged to the settlement, he wouldn't want a horse. Then, so far's I know the farmers——"

One pulled out a pipe. Another rubbed some tobacco in his hands and rolled a cigarette. Then, talking in quiet voices, they began to consult.

CHAPTER XXVI

ASHTON TAKES A FRESH KNOCK

ASHTON turned in his bunk and noted where a sunbeam touched the wall. He ought to have got up an hour since and fed the horse that had carried him from the railroad. After breakfast he must go across to Latimer's for his team and then to Glencoyne, in order to find out if somebody driving to Walpole would tie the borrowed horse behind his rig.

Tom had got home from Brandon in the evening, and since he was tired by the strain he had borne for four or five days, he had slept like a log. Now the time was nearly seven o'clock, and he had a crowded day before him. When he was at Glencoyne he must see Harmon, and he reflected that although he had been warned to be cautious he was not forced to be civil. Then he must start his harvesting. He needed somebody to put up the stooks, but for a day or two the sheaves might lie in the stubble, and until he had seen Harmon, he was not going to look for help. In fact, he might not bother to reap the crop.

Anyhow, for once, he would stop in bed until he wanted to get up, and, reaching for his pipe, he pondered moodily. The Brandon lawyer was not hopeful. On the face of it, he thought Harmon, after giving proper notice, entitled to seize the farm, and he doubted if stipulations not expressly stated in the mortgage deed would stand. For all that, a debtor might urge certain objections; there were grounds on which one could put up a fight, and the credi-

tor might perhaps be bluffed. Ashton must see the fellow and take the line the lawyer carefully indicated. Tom hoped to do so when nobody was at the store, because if he had an audience some of his remarks might be libelous.

When he had smoked his pipe he got up, lighted the kindling in the stove, and went to the stable, but stopped at the door. The horse had vanished, and the saddle and head-stall were gone. Tom was frankly baffled. Since he had settled at Glencoyne nobody had stolen a horse, and all his neighbors had teams. He had heard nobody, and the stable was not thirty yards from the house. For all that, the animal certainly was gone.

Tom got breakfast, and for some time searched the plain. Had he got up sooner, he might have followed the horse's track across the dewy grass, but the sun had dried the turf, and so far as he could distinguish, the crumbling gumbo in the trail carried no fresh marks. When he was forced to acknowledge himself baffled, he started on foot for Latimer's, and found Bob at the Cave.

Across the belt of wheat, a binder clashed and rattled and three horses tossed their heads. The machine's revolving arms shone and vanished; one heard the knife tinkle in the toothed slides and the thick straw crash. Tom's look got envious; Latimer's crop was altogether his. His man was a good driver, and Bob had come across for a fresh spool of twine.

"The stuff ought to thrash out number one hard," he said. "Your team's all right, and Hope has got your third horse. However, if you will carry the twine across, I'll start the stove and cut some bacon. Then while we dine you can tell me about your interview with the lawyer."

Ashton thanked him. There was not much use in his

chasing a fellow who had probably started ten or twelve hours since, and he must be satisfied to warn the police. He narrated his finding that the horse was gone.

"It's very queer," said Bob. "Horse-stealing is not a Canadian industry, and I doubt if a thief could sell the animal where the R.N.W. patrol. But my man will soon be stopped for the twine."

"Very well," said Ashton, "I'll earn my dinner, and while you are cooking I'll put up the stooks."

For a time he did so. Where a binder cuts swiftly, to seize and pile the sheaves is for one man a strenuous job, and since harvest had but begun the team was fresh. Ashton imagined Bob and his helper had exchanged their occupations; but he himself had harvested when he was a boy, and he reckoned few plainsmen could use his speed. There was the galling thing; although he was a good farmer, Bob and Hope had beaten him. But, in reality, they had not. Harmon and poverty had beaten him. When you got into debt you were done with, particularly if your creditor was an unscrupulous, cunning swine.

Advancing fast but smoothly, with all his movements rythmical, he seized the sheaves the binder threw back. One in each hand, he pushed their tops together, and reached for a third to lock the pile. Then he swiftly pushed another two or three into the corners. An odd number made a symmetrical stook, but you mustn't lose speed, and you mustn't crowd the stuff.

Sometimes the Ontario man on the binder turned his head. The big fellow swinging along while he tossed the sheaves exactly where they best would stand, was some harvester. The firm stooks sprang fast and the long row

was even. When you loaded the stuff in the wagon you could drive straight ahead.

Stopping at a corner, Ashton got his breath and rubbed the sweat from his face. Two horsemen had pulled up by the Cave, and Ashton knew their red coats and Stetson hats; moreover one held another horse's bridle. Tom went across. He had thought to see Waring, but the constables were men from a different patrol. Latimer's look was puzzled, and perhaps disturbed.

"Hallo, boys!" said Ashton. "You have got the horse I lost. Were you going to my house?"

"We have been there," one said dryly. "You allow the horse is yours?"

"He's Brown's, of Walpole. I hired him yesterday. Where did you find him?"

"By the pond in the *coulée*, five or six miles from your farm."

"It's strange," said Ashton. "I was going to send for you. Yesterday evening I put the horse in the stable and I heard nobody about, but when I got up he was gone."

"In the evening? You claim you were not out after dark?"

Ashton glanced at the fellow. He perhaps thought his look inscrutable; Tom thought it wooden, and he began to be annoyed. However, until he saw where the other's questions led, he must not let himself go.

"I don't bother to claim anything, but I was in bed. All I did after I got back from Walpole was to cook some supper."

"Did you meet anybody on the trail, after you passed the Glencoyne fork?"

"I did not. But I don't see what it's got to do with you."

"Come on round here," said the other constable, pushing the horse whose bridle he held.

"You are not forced to answer the fellows, Tom; and I doubt if they are entitled to examine you," Latimer remarked.

Ashton hesitated. He was not going to be bullied by the police, but they had excited his curiosity, and he walked round the horse. Near the stirrup the animal's hair was clotted and stuck down by some glutinous stuff. The bridle was nearly new, and the leather carried one or two dark stains. The policeman touched the spots with his riding quirt.

"By George," said Ashton, "the marks are blood!"

"Looks like that," the other dryly agreed. "You might think the fellow who got on that horse at the settlement had blood on his boots, but didn't know he'd stepped in the pool. Then his hands weren't clean. Maybe he forgot to rub them; maybe he hadn't time——"

Ashton was altogether puzzled, and he looked up with a frown.

"Last night Harmon was killed in his store at Glen-coyne," the constable resumed.

"Do you mean he was murdered?" Ashton inquired hoarsely.

"*Killed* is the word. The other's for a jury to fix. What do you know about it?"

The blood leaped to Ashton's skin, and his eyes sparkled.

"You d—— fools! I don't pretend to be sorry. If anybody about the settlement deserved to be killed, Harmon was the man. All the same, I had nothing to do with

it. Look at my boots. I wore them yesterday; they are the only sound pair I have got. My clothes are not the clothes I wore at Brandon; you don't go to town in overalls, but you can search my house."

"The house will be searched, all right. You allow nobody saw you go there? All you can give us is your statement that you went to bed?"

"That is so. Everybody knows I live alone," Ashton rejoined.

"Very well. We meet an officer at Birchwood in the afternoon, and I expect he'd like to see you. Get on that horse."

Ashton loaded his pipe, got a light, and gave Latimer an inquiring glance.

"On the whole, I think I would not refuse," said Bob. "If they ask for a warrant, you'd be formally a prisoner, but if you go to Birchwood and satisfy the officer, he will be glad to let you go. The important thing is not to be arrested."

Ashton was nothing of a lawyer, and he knew Bob was not, but he thought him logical.

"When I speculated in an Assiniboine farm I was a trustful fool," he said. "I've taken one blasted knock after another, and the last is not the worst. For all that, but for Harmon I'd have made good. When he was alive, he exploited me, and it looks as if he'd haunt me after he was dead." He turned to the police. "Well, let's shove off. If you haven't first-class brains, you must use the brains you have got, and I dare say your boss is not altogether a fool."

He got up, gave Bob a hard smile, and pushed his horse. The constables allowed him to take the trail, and followed eight or nine yards behind. Bob noted that one's right

hand was on the holster at his hip, and imagined the other's revolver was loose. Tom was not yet arrested, but the boys refused to take a chance, and, in the circumstances, Bob thought them justified. Although they had not got the proper man, Tom's luck certainly was bad.

Bob resumed his cooking. He was sorry for Tom, but he did not see where he could help, and harvest must be reaped. Moreover, men who labor like Canadian harvesters must be generously fed. In the evening, when the dew wet the wheat and the binder stopped, he threw a grain-bag on the least tired horse's back, and rode across to Hope's. Mrs. Hope occupied an American rocking-chair at the bottom of the veranda steps; Hope a piece of old carpet in the grass. His back was against the wall and his feet were on a box. Bob got down and laughed.

"Adam begins to feel he has had enough. How long did he stay with it?"

"Twelve hours," Hope replied. "I cannot claim I'm fresh, but I have to stay with it for the next two months. We mustn't grumble. At length, we are going to be paid for our labor."

Bob nodded. Until the snow fell, and perhaps for some time afterwards, all must labor from sunrise to dark. The wheat was not stacked; when the stocks had dried, one thrashed in the field, and the straw and chaff from the separator's lofty spout covered the piled grain. The *bin*, if properly made, might stand for the winter, but as a rule, when the thrashers moved to the next farm, one began the long haul to the railroad, and until the last sack was swept up by the elevator one did not stop. Nobody had all the help he needed, useful harvesters from Ontario and Michigan demanded first-class pay, and the labor broke raw emigrants and city workmen. Sometimes it

broke the horses, and in a scorching afternoon one must loose an exhausted team.

Nobody had yet thought about a wheat pool, and quarter-section farmers were not the sort of customers Montreal banks cultivated. As a rule, when harvest ripened none had met a bill for nearly twelve months, and all were forced to sell. In consequence, when the crop was good and the wheat trains crowded the track to the Lakes, a flood of paper money began to run the other way, and carried brief prosperity across the Northwest. The noble crop, however, must yet be reaped, the days got shorter, and one could not work in the dark.

"Has the news from the settlement reached you?" Hope resumed.

"I know Harmon is dead. I expect you don't yet know the police have carried off Ashton?"

"But it's ridiculous!" Mrs. Hope exclaimed.

"Do you mean, the damfools have arrested him?" Hope inquired.

"I feel like that," said Bob. "In the meantime, however, I suppose he's *detained*, and when you weigh the facts——"

He narrated all he knew, and Hope's look got disturbed. Mrs. Hope's was frankly pitiful.

"Oh, poor Tom!" she said. "He, of course, had nothing to do with it; but when, at last, his harvest might have helped him pay his debt and speed's important, he must wait for his trial. To know the wheat might be spoiled must be horrible."

"The wheat musn't spoil," said Hope. "I reckon Tom must stand his trial. The boys know how he felt about Harmon and when he talked about assaulting him McBride was here. Then he admits he hired the horse.

Well, if Tom was properly mad he might have thrown Harmon against his desk, and I dursn't state he would not throw him down the steps; but nobody is going to persuade me he used the axe. And he certainly did not try to rob the fellow."

"Yes, Adam, it's obvious," said Mrs. Hope. "There is, however, another thing that I expect you have not weighed. Harmon is done with, and although Tom's debt stands, if his fresh creditor was properly steered, I believe he would be just."

"Mellish? Well, he will not have Harmon to advise him, and I think he said Mrs. Mellish extended her tour to Honolulu, or Japan; so long as she stops there, it's not important. You see, Bob, he told us he was coming back in the fall, and Martha not long since got a letter—Mellish was kind of apologetic. Not much sand in the fellow, but I reckon he means well."

Mrs. Hope smiled. "Where it was not too risky, Tony would sooner be noble, and his company will take over Harmon's mortgages. I think he has begun to doubt his agent, because he hopes he may be allowed to consult with us. In the meantime, we must do something about Tom's harvest."

Bob thought Hope might be justified to concentrate on his own harvest, since its reaping would demand all the effort he could use; but he would not let down his friend. In Assiniboia, as in the Old Country, human nature was queerly mixed, but contrasting qualities were perhaps more marked. Some old-time settlers were sullenly antagonistic to strangers, and when they exploited a beginner could not force themselves to be polite. But there was another sort: hospitable, friendly, and splendidly stanch; indomitable men and women, who trusted their

luck, and when they had not a dollar would lend you a plow team and divide with you their last slab of pork.

"Until Harmon's notice runs out and Mellish takes over, the farm is Tom's," he said. "All the same, so long as the police hold him, he cannot get to work, and fall and Indian summer are short——"

"Exactly," said Mrs. Hope. "A man loves a labored argument. Which of you is going to see Tom's lawyer at Brandon? And who will engage harvesters and start them on his farm?"

"Martha has got it. As a rule, she gets there first," said Hope. "In the morning, I'll pull out for Brandon and dump you at Walpole to look for harvesters. If you could get two or three from Michigan, they'd put through the job, and we might fix a sliding-scale bonus that would encourage them to push ahead. Let's get to it. My proposition is——"

For a time they consulted, and then Latimer got on his horse. In the morning they must start for the railroad, and since Ashton's need was greater, their harvest must wait.

CHAPTER XXVII

JANE COMES HOME

THE evening began to cool, and Mrs. Hope carried a cushion to the veranda steps. After a laborious day she refused to drag out an easy-chair. Her skin was burned by the scorching sun, the hot wheat straw had blistered her hands, and for some time she had jolted in the binder's iron saddle. To be tired in the evening was nothing fresh, but she had found out that sometimes fatigue banishes sleep, and before she went to bed she must let herself go slack.

Hope was not back from Brandon, but a man he had sent was yet at work. When he stooped all but his bent shoulders vanished behind the wheat; and then for a moment one saw his body swing as he threw the sheaves together. His advance was a sort of linked-note rhythm, but one felt he did not waste effort, and he kept the proper beat. Mrs. Hope knew a good workman moved like that.

The fellow was not young. He talked about his bush clearing, where he fed five or six cows and had himself chopped and grubbed up every tree, back in Ontario. Now his wife herded the cattle, and he on the plains, reckoned to earn a sum that would carry them through the long winter. Mrs. Hope had promised to try out another helper, for soon after Adam went, a young Irish lad arrived on foot. His boots were broken, his body was thin, and he admitted he had three or four weeks since worked at a Belfast mill. He declared he could go no farther; the

shoes were dropping off his feet, and although he could not yoke a horse, he might be taught.

Mrs. Hope thought him keen; some emigrants one employed were not. The Ontario man reckoned the boy had sand, but at supper he stated he could not eat, and Mrs. Hope imagined he slept, a deep sleep of exhaustion, in the hay-mow. Although she was young and knew she had yet some charm, to be alone with the harvesters did not embarrass her. She imagined a woman was as safe at a wheat-belt farm as in a crowded town; moreover, if one went discreetly, one perhaps was safe anywhere. After all, a man waited for something like a challenge. For a few moments the wheat and the harvester's bent figure fixed her glance. The crop was a noble crop, but every bushel Adam thrashed was bought by effort. In the Northwest one got nothing for nothing. Canada was the land of promise, and Martha believed the promise stood, but with it went a stipulation. One must, like Adam, carry the load that was given his first ancestor.

Mrs. Hope turned her head. A woman on foot slowly advanced, and since harvest was not the time when one went visiting, and a farmer's wife would drive a rig, she thought it strange. All the same, the stranger steered for the homestead, and she carried a traveling bag.

Then Mrs. Hope jumped up, and although she waved a friendly signal, admitted she had got something of a jolt. Her visitor was Mrs. Ashton, and to soothe her might be hard. To begin with, she must pretend Tom's neighbors thought his *detention* rather a joke.

"If I had known you were at home, I'd have sent for you," she said. "However, I am glad you came across, and you must stop with us until Tom is back."

Mrs. Ashton looked up as if she were puzzled. She

was obviously tired, and was perhaps thinner, but nothing suggested that she was disturbed. In fact, Mrs. Hope noted a sort of confidence that had not marked Jane before.

"But I have not been home. When I got off the cars nobody from Glencoyne was at the station; you see, there was no use in telegraphing I had started, because the message might wait at Walpole for three or four days. One of the French-Canadians who are building a house at Creek Fork had gone in for some lumber, and when we made him understand where I was going he gave me a seat in his wagon."

"You poor thing! The Fork is six miles off, and you carried your bag. Well, our house is nearer the spot than yours; but where did you get supper?"

Mrs. Ashton said the French-Canadians had given her some, and had they known English, she might have persuaded them to drive her home, but she doubted if they understood her, and the man's horses were tired. Mrs. Hope nodded. For all the traffic between Ontario and Quebec, some *habitants* use only old-fashioned French. In consequence, Jane's hosts could have told her nothing about Tom, and it looked as if she did not know her husband was a prisoner. Mrs. Hope admitted she did not see the line she ought to take, and as the house was yet hot, she went for a folding-chair. When she got back Mrs. Ashton resumed:

"I oughtn't to bother Adam; but do you think he would drive me home?"

"Adam is at Brandon. You must stop for the night," Mrs. Hope said firmly.

She saw the other's disappointment. In the morning, Jane imagined Ashton would be strenuously occupied, and

to call him from the binder in the stress of harvest might not help the explanations both perhaps must supply. Well, Jane's pluck would soon be tried more sternly than she had thought.

"But how is Tom?" she asked. "Since he's a good farmer, I expect his wheat is as fine as yours?"

Mrs. Hope said when she last saw Ashton he was well, and his wheat was rather better than theirs. She ought to be frank, but Jane was tired, and she shrank from delivering the smashing knock.

"But where were you?" she said. "For twelve months we got no news about you."

"I was ashamed to write. At first, all I wanted was to escape; I felt I couldn't stop—Tom and I quarreled. I thought he ought to have told me what Canada really was like. He thought I hadn't helped him where I might. Well, perhaps I hadn't. You see, at Liverpool I wasn't taught to work."

Mrs. Hope nodded. She had known Old Country emigrants talk like that before, and the strange thing was, they rather boasted their incompetence. It looked as if their pretended gentility was a superstition they dared not let go. Mrs. Ashton, however, resumed her awkward apology.

"All the same, I tried. One doesn't like to be thought useless, and to think one useless because one cannot bake very good bread and is afraid of horses isn't fair. I was afraid of horses; I couldn't help it, and ours were savage brutes. Then, of course, when you are cooking and baking, you cannot wash clothes, particularly when your boiler is a coal-oil can. At Liverpool we had a wash-house and the heavy stuff went to a laundry."

For a few moments she hesitated. Her habit was not

to weigh things, she was carried away by impulses, and now her subject entangled her; but Mrs. Hope understood. The girl's mother had been indulgent, and, since she was attractive, she was perhaps flattered and courted. In Canada, the pretenses and conventions behind which she had sheltered were gone. Jane was, no doubt, bewildered and daunted, but she could not properly picture her bewilderment.

"When I grumbled Tom got angry," she said, as if she pondered. "I think, although I didn't really mean to, I pushed him into debt. He is a good farmer, and I suppose he thought, if he could get proper machines and teams, he'd show me what he could do. He's proud, and he declared if he had half a chance he'd make more money than the ladylike clerks I knew at Liverpool. The trouble was, he began borrowing, and somehow Harmon cheated, but when I found out the farm was mortgaged I knew we were broke. So long as you have a house, you feel you are not altogether done for. Well, ours was Harmon's, and if I couldn't help, I wasn't going to be a load. The only plan was to run away."

"Your husband searched Winnipeg for you, and I believe he fought a floorwalker at the store where you were employed."

Mrs. Ashton looked up, and a touch of color stained her skin, but she said nothing. The harvester crossed the stubble, and in the evening calm the crackle of the straw under his boots was sharply distinct.

"Where did you go after you left Winnipeg?" Mrs. Hope resumed.

Mrs. Ashton told her, and she thought the tale moving, for Jane unconsciously narrated something like her *conversion*. To imagine she thought labor dignified would

be theatrical, and Canadians, like other folk, labored for a reward or because they are forced; but she had, at all events, begun to see that to do so was not humiliating. Mrs. Hope thought Ashton's frankness had something to do with it, since Jane was resolved she would not go back until she had proved herself independent, and could force her husband to admit she had some useful qualities. The ambition was a good ambition, but it had cost her much.

When she was fired in Winnipeg, and she frankly used the word, she took the cars for the West, and was for a time general help at a Revelstoke workman's boarding-house. The work was much the sort of work from which she had run away, but until a mine in the mountains shut down, she kept her post; and then started for Vancouver. An ambitious city was springing from the ashes of the wooden town, and white and yellow and brown adventurers crowded the new streets. Jane had reached Canada's farther west, where immigration is from the East, and Briton and Ontario Canadian met the Jap and Chinaman. Since cheap labor was needed, none was yet shut out, and each lived after the habit of his kind. The Anglo-Saxons built Hastings Street, and the others the slab shacks behind the sawmill dumps. Some suppositiously burrowed underground, but the police did not meddle with Chinatown.

It looked as if Jane, dumped in the queer turmoil, did not loose her nerve. At all events, she was for a time waitress at a dollar hotel. Then she got a post at a clairvoyant's parlor, and did not at once find out that fortune-telling was not the most profitable business the house carried on. When she did find out she stole away in the morning while her employers were yet asleep, and she stated that but for a friendly city policeman she might

not have got her trunk. Mrs. Hope reflected that Jane's cure perhaps was drastic, but it had worked.

She crossed the strait to Victoria, and when she went to the woods with an English rancher's wife her luck began to turn. The Englishman was rich, and Mrs. Hope imagined he was not seriously a farmer, but Jane thought the spacious ranch house beautiful, and she loved the two small children. Winter stopped at the Cascade mountains on the mainland coast, and soft Pacific winds blew across the big firs and red arbutus. Had she come there fresh from England, Jane reckoned she might have been happy in the Island woods, but she reflected that she had run away from Tom and, for her sake, he had mortgaged his farm.

The important thing was, they wanted her to stop, and to explain why she refused was awkward. At length, somebody thought her useful and would be sorry when she was gone. Yet all she could do for her mistress, she could do for her husband and herself. Mrs. Hope imagined Jane at the ranch house got back the confidence she had lost. Now, however, it was built upon a strong foundation.

She stated that if she stopped by the quiet lake in the woods, she might stop for good. The warm Pacific coast had a queer, tranquil charm; at the ranch house one was not forced to be parsimonious, and all went smoothly. In fact, Jane dared not stop. Her home, on the bleak plains across the Rockies, was a long way off, and in a different, and sterner, world; and when she knew the snow was melting she braced up for a fresh plunge and started east. She was, however, not yet going back to Tom. When she did go, he must acknowledge her an efficient helpmate, and she must put some money in the

joint purse. At one time Jane was extravagant. Now she was miserly.

She recrossed the Rockies, and on the high plains at the wheat-belt's western edge a Scandinavian farmer's wife engaged her. Each of the old woman's three stalwart sons had preempted a quarter-section, and the farm was large, but they were kind folk, and Jane got, and honestly earned, standard pay. The youngest, and largest, son wanted to marry her, and his mother approved. Since the Scandinavians were industrious and sternly practical, Jane thought that something, but when she declared she had a husband Olave was philosophical, and his relations as friendly as before.

The old woman was the driving force; on the dry soil the wheat crop was light and she fed poultry. Turkey poults swarmed about the homestead, and Jane's main business was to rear the delicate broods. Turkey poults are fastidious, and will not thrive for all who give them food. She said she loved the little friendly things; at all events, her flock grew fast, and one day she saw a plan. Poultry farming paid the old woman, and it ought to pay her; she would try it, and as she had two hundred dollars the experiment would cost Tom nothing. In the meantime, however, they must concentrate on the harvest, which ought to help them satisfy some part of Harmon's claim.

"It looks as if you did not get the newspapers at the Scandinavians' farm," Mrs. Hope remarked.

Jane agreed. Her employers did not know much English, and when work stopped, one went to bed.

"Harmon is dead," said Mrs. Hope.

"Oh, well, I suppose the trustees will expect us to pay our debt, but they can't be worse creditors, and they might be better."

"He was killed," Mrs. Hope resumed.

Jane gave her a swift, disturbed glance. Somehow Martha's quietness was ominous.

"Do you mean somebody killed him? Who is the man?"

"We do not know. You must brace up, Jane. I expect it is but for a few days, and perhaps to help them follow another clue; but the police have detained your husband."

The color drained from Jane's face. She got up, and then seized a post, as if for support. Her eyes were wide with bewilderment and horror.

"No," she said. "It's ridiculous! Tom might have beaten him. I would have liked to beat him, but my husband is not a murderer. And McBride knows us; the sergeant had nothing to do with it. The others must be mad!"

"You mustn't admit you hated Harmon. We do not know where McBride is, but when he gets to work I dare say Tom will be released. Now I must try to tell you all we have, so far, found out."

Jane went back to her chair and fought hard for calm, but she had, when she was physically tired, got an unnerving shock. She had started for home, proud of her independence, and resolved to be her husband's equal partner; but Tom was gone. The thing was horrible. All the same, it must be fronted.

"Tom had nothing to do with it," she said, in a queer, shaking voice. "Somebody stole the horse, in order to fix the blame on him. But he had nothing to do with it. Whoever did kill Harmon, it wasn't Tom, and McBride must find the man he hurt as much as he hurt us. But Tom—— Oh, there's no use in talking; I get nowhere!"

She wept, with frank abandonment, for Jane's gentility was, after all, not deep; but by and by she looked up.

"You said Latimer was going to hire harvesters for us? In the morning I must go home."

"You might stop with us, my dear. You see, the men are strangers, and I expect Bob has fixed things in such a way that for their own sakes they will work as fast as possible."

Jane smiled, a rather scornful smile.

"You are not afraid. At one time, I suppose I durstn't have gone; I'd certainly have thought it was not the proper thing. Anyhow, they will work faster when I am about, and if they work properly, they must be properly fed. I'm not a first-class cook, but at the boarding-house I helped in the kitchen. Then I might help in the field. If the horses were harnessed for me, I dare say I could drive the binder."

Mrs. Hope doubted, but she thought Jane's conversion, so to speak, complete. At all events, she had qualities Martha at one time had not thought she had.

"Very well," she said. "If you feel you ought to go——"

"Don't you see I must? My grumbling really pushed Tom into debt, and now I cannot let him down. I hope he will soon be back. If he is not back, I will need money for the cleverest lawyer I can get. Although I cannot do all I'd like to, I can do something."

Mrs. Hope kissed her.

"You are a frontierswomen, Jane. But you are tired, and when harvest begins the first day is exhausting. After breakfast the hired man will drive you across; and now you must go to bed."

CHAPTER XXVIII

MISS HARMON TAKES THE TRAIL

RUTH ALLEN, behind the post-office rails at the end of the store, flicked over a wad of paper money, and marked the sum in a document she skewered on a file. She was not an accountant, and Mrs. Olsen's bookkeeping was primitive, but the house's customers did not dispute their bills. Although Ruth admitted she must not be fastidious, she hated to finger the greasy currency, and she did not like the smell of bacon, cheese, and tobacco that floated about the store.

The morning was hot and she heard the shingles on the roof crack in the sun. Her skin was damp and she was thirsty, but Glencoyne water tasted rather like a weak dose of salts, and she must wait for twelve o'clock, when Minna would brew some tea. At a Montreal hotel where she had stopped for a night, ice floated in a glass tank on the sides of which the condensed damp was like silver frost. At an English country house she knew, there was a bench and a table under a noble purple beech. In hot summer afternoons one could pull a cabbage leaf and carry large red raspberries to the bench in the shade. Or one might go to the house for an old, cut-glass jug of lemonade.

It was done with. Ruth was at Glencoyne, in the North-West Territories, and had not long since informed her English relations that she meant to stop; but she was not forced to stop at the Olsen store. Their unscrupulous competitor was gone, and when the splendid harvest

was reaped and money circulated Mrs. Olsen could get expert help. Minna would not need her, but Bob declared he did—Ruth smiled, a gentle smile. She had not thought her home might be a cave, but she might risk it, so long as the cave was Bob's. Besides, the tide had turned, and ought to carry far ahead all who had strained against the ebb.

Ruth heard a step and looked up. Miss Harmon stopped by the post-office rail and calmly studied her. Ruth fought the antagonism Pearl excited; twenty-four hours had not quite gone since the storekeeper's funeral.

"Looks like a useful wad," Pearl remarked, indicating the greasy bills. "I guess the boys bring you their money and ask us to book their debts. They are boneheads, anyhow, and if I wanted, two or three should sweat for it. Well, you're a pretty good saleswoman, and but for you we'd have frozen old Minna out. Now I'm not worrying about her competition, and if you're not mean, you can tell me something I want to know. Did the mail-carrier bring you a telegram for the police?"

Ruth hesitated. She was not shabbily revengeful, and Pearl had some grounds for inquiring, but she ought to know the post-office rules.

"You are not allowed to talk?" Pearl said. "Well, you don't need to. When Bower went for Leslie's horse, you sent on the message? I reckon I can persuade the operator at Walpole to tell me where it was from. There's another thing. In half an hour I take the trail, and I can't fix when I'll be back, but I want you and Minna to run the store for me."

Ruth looked at her with frank surprise. Pearl frowned impatiently.

"You can fix your pay; or you can take a commission

on all the stuff you sell. Minna's an old fool, but I allow she's straight. Suppose you call her? I must get on a move."

Ruth went for Mrs. Olsen and afterwards wondered why they agreed. On the whole, she thought Pearl dominated them and carried them away.

"I don't know if I'll stop in this bum town; I don't have to," she said. "If I do keep up the Harmon shingle, you're not going to worry me. There'll soon be all the trade that both of us can handle. Pop knew; he was a bigger man than the boneheads thought, and he had planned to grab the lot. I guess he might have done it, but now he's gone, I'm not greedy. All the same, I'm his daughter, and he left me a job I reckon to put through. While I'm busy about it, I can't run the store."

She went off, and Ruth thought she carried herself with a touch of tragic dignity. Pearl Harmon was not consciously theatrical, but she seemed to stand for relentless, savage force, and although Ruth had frankly hated her, she admitted a sort of grudging admiration. Harmon was a brute, but he was, as his daughter declared, a big man, and she had inherited something of his quality.

An hour afterwards, Pearl stopped her team in Ashton's harvest field. Jane, driving the binder, awkwardly steered her three horses round a corner, and it looked as if she meant to drive past the rig. Pearl watched her with a touch of scornful amusement.

The morning was hot and Jane's large hat flapped ridiculously. Her face was as red as the paint on the machine, her mouth was tight, and her brows were knit. The horses, pursued by swarming flies, advanced leisurely; their track was not straight, and the binders' arms revolved by jerks. Behind the machine, two sweating men

tossed the sheaves together, and Pearl imagined Mrs. Ashton's help at all events allowed them for a time to slacken speed.

Pearl was nothing of an artist, but she knew the harvest field, splashed by shining red and gold, was not the awkward woman's proper background. Yet she had perhaps some charm that might move a man, particularly if he was a fool. Pearl reckoned she herself had charm, but she was competent, and knew where to use the firm hand. In the meantime it looked as if Mrs. Ashton meant to drive past, and Pearl pushed her horses in front of the machine. The other team stopped, and Jane swung slackly in the iron saddle.

"Have you seen your husband?" Pearl inquired.

Jane had not. Bob had promised to find out when a visit would be allowed, but she was not going to satisfy Pearl Harmon's impertinent curiosity.

"Move your team," she ordered her. "If I call the men, they will put you off our farm."

"I wonder——" said Pearl. "For one thing, I have a long whip. You are not the sort I would bother to be friendly with; but I don't want to hurt you. Have you seen your man?"

"I have not," said Jane, after a moment's hesitation. "We cannot be friendly."

"Maybe that's so, and I'm not going to worry; but you don't have to be a fool. Anyhow, when the police seized your husband they did not get the proper man, and if he's sent up for trial, I'll be a pretty good witness for the defense. But I reckon he will not be tried."

Jane's heart beat, and something of her antagonism vanished. The girl had not an object for cheating, and her habit was rather to use insolent force.

"That's all I can tell you just now," Pearl resumed. "If you had been at the police post, you might have known where McBride is. I reckon the old fox will claim the case is his, and he's already got to work."

"But the police took my husband——"

"Sure they did. The boys are boneheads," Pearl agreed. "Now Pop is gone, the only man around Glen-coyne who isn't three parts a fool is old Mack. In a way, there's the trouble, because when Mack gets on a move he moves pretty fast. Well, I reckon you won't have to wait."

Perhaps it was strange, but Jane was comforted. Somehow she knew the girl sincere; moreover, she thought her occupied by a revengeful plan, about which she would, no doubt, refuse to talk.

"Waring was not one of the troopers who came for Tom," she said.

Pearl gave her a scornful smile.

"Waring is as dull as the others. The young fella' doesn't know his luck," she remarked. "However, you want to get busy, and if it's possible, I must keep in front of Mack."

She started her horses, and the binder team tossed their heads and strained. The knife tinkled musically and the wooden arms revolved, but the track the machine cut was more crooked than before.

Some days afterwards, a sooty locomotive and a row of box-cars rolled into a western station. A new grain elevator pushed up its ugly bulk by the line, and at its foot three or four ship-lap houses bordered the wheel-torn trail. The train might not be loaded for some time, but all the cars the company did not use were going west, for

the road to the Lakes must be open when the wheat began to move.

Waring and Smithson got down from the car next the caboose; Sergeant McBride sat where he had waited for the train, fifty yards off in the grass. Since there was not a stockyard ramp or cattle gangway, the boys might be bothered to unload their horses, and he wanted to see how they would get to work. He thought the brakemen interested, but none offered much useful advice.

Waring went to the elevator, where a mechanic was occupied, and by and by dragged out two thick but narrow planks and a large box. Helped by Smithson, he supported the planks on the box and pushed their other end into the car. The horses did not like the bridge, and McBride doubted if a stranger could have led them down, but if a trooper could not persuade his horse to trust him, he was not the sort they wanted in the Royal North-West. The boys did get the animals down, and when Smithson invited a brakeman to carry back the planks McBride approved, although he did not think the other's frank refusal strange. Joining the group, he inquired when the train would start.

A brakeman said the locomotive and caboose were going as soon as a fast freight went through, but they did not know where she was, and in the meantime they would take a walk uptown. He indicated the forlorn cluster of houses, and added that he had started up the stove, and if they liked, the police might cook supper in the caboose. McBride ordered the constables to give the horses some forage and a drink at the tank.

"When yez have got some food ye'll need to take the road," he said.

He waited for them in the caboose, and when supper was over pulled out an envelope.

"Yez were not thransported west by special order, and at the risk of exciting the jealousy of the boys whose proper beat it is, for your conspicuous cleverness," he remarked. "The reason was, yez know Pete Wilshaw."

"We have some grounds to know the fellow," Waring agreed.

"Then yez will, if yez can find him, arrest the aforesaid Pete for assault and batthery, in that he did, on a date I misremember, put William Crowe in a well at Soda Creek; the rest av it is written in the document. Your line of search is marked on the sketch map, but when yez inquire for Pete yez will use discretion. Where yez stop at a farm, yez might, for example, look over the fireguards, and ask, as if it did not matther, whether any strangers are moving about the country. Do you get it, boys?"

"We mustn't advertise our search," said Waring, glancing at the map. "Our business is to stop the way to the frontier, but it must look as if we made a regulation patrol. Well, we might lead folks to think so; but if I'm allowed the remark, common assault is not a serious crime, and since we are some distance west, we cannot cut Wilshaw's shortest line to the frontier from Glencoyne."

McBride's eyes twinkled. "Weel, I taught ye to ob-sairve. Pete will not take the shortest line; he'll reckon it might be watched, and he has no horse. On the whole, I think he has not much money; his shack at Glencoyne was searched and we found his *cache*. If he had stopped to think, he'd have gone first for the wad. Then, although he's for the frontier, I reckon he will not use the sort av speed that might attrract curiosity, and he will not think

he's forced. When ye must treat with the newspaper gentlemen, politeness pays, and I have known them take a hint."

Waring saw a light. A Winnipeg newspaper had printed a rather gory but on the whole accurate narrative of the tragedy at the store. Waring quoted the concluding paragraph.

"In less than twelve hours, the police, with the efficiency that marks the R.N.W.M.P. tracked and found the horse on which the killer made his escape, and shortly afterwards a Glencoyne farmer was detained on suspicion. His neighbors, and all who believe the plains must be kept as safe for industrious settlers as our city's streets, wait fresh developments with keen interest and with confidence in the officers of the Prairie Patrol.' "

"Just that!" said McBride, twinkling. "And I would not say but the boys are right."

Smithson had quietly pondered, but now he looked up with a grin.

"You told the fellow to print it! The notion was, Pete might think we'd get busy framing up a case against the wrong man? But, since he's not all a fool, he might think you bluffed."

"Tut, tut!" said McBride. "Am I not as modest as another? And the Royal North-West never frame a case. In the woods, Wilshaw is as clever as you and me. In civilized spots, he has a quare suspiciousness that generally fools himself. F'r instance, he reckoned Harmon wanted him put away."

"Looks like that, all right, Sergeant," Smithson agreed, remembering Wilshaw's remarks when he was a prisoner. "Did Harmon put you wise?"

"He did not. Wan must not be boasting, but an old

police sergeant does not need a hint from a criminal. Long I waited, watching him and Murchison at the hotel. The house is his, by and by he'd have pushed out Murchison; the dirty trade is profitable, but Pete, maybe, wanted too large a share, and they dursn't bate him down. Well, I reckon he would have liked fine for us to send the fella' up, although he did not give us the useful word."

"But if Wilshaw thought he had done so, why did he not put us on his accomplices' track?" Waring inquired.

"Pete is not that sort; the fella's some part Indian. Then, if he gave away his partner, all he'd get would be to know he'd sent him to jail. If he waited, he might squeeze him for a useful sum; and if he could not, he himself would 'punish him.'"

Waring thought McBride's surmises accurate; but he said:

"Hope and two or three more imagine Harmon schemed to seize all that is worth seizing at Glencoyne. But for the splendid harvest, he might have carried out his plans, and his risking his freedom for a comparatively small sum is queer."

McBride nodded. "Human nature's queer. To know where to stop is the important thing, but Harmon did not. He had got much, he wanted more, and for the thrifling extra, he lost the lot. Ye might philosophize about a thing like yon."

Smithson's habit was not to philosophize, but he had cogitated, and he looked up.

"Wilshaw is pretty slick, Sergeant. A fool would go straight for Dakota; but you reckon he is taking the long line, southwest, for Montana. Well, suppose he somehow got a hint we knew? Maybe he'd double on his trail and shove up north for the woods and his Indian

pals. If he made it, we mightn't find him in twelve months."

"Your business is to see he does not," McBride rejoined, and got up. "I claimed this case for mine; I'm thinking it's my last big job. And I claimed for helpers lads I'd taught and reckoned I could trust. Weel, yez have your instructions, and ye'll get going."

They got on their horses, and Waring, swinging his hand to his Stetson hat, gave McBride a salute to which he was not properly entitled.

"As far as it's possible for us, we will see you out, *sir*."

CHAPTER XXIX

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

SUNDAY afternoon was calm and hot, and where the shadow of the house fell Hope lay in the parched grass. His clothes were scanty and his skin and the faded material were the color of the soil. Latimer had arrived a few minutes since, and when he sat down by the bench Mrs. Hope and Ruth occupied he declared he was actually, and very properly, at their feet. The sun was yet on the cracking veranda roof, and the house was intolerably hot. Two small logs, lying across a black circle, indicated where Mrs. Hope had cooked a picnic lunch.

Bob drained a glass of lemonade she gave him, and looked about. The wheat was melting, and long rows of stooks crossed the stubble. The sheaves tapered to their bristling heads where the bent ears shone like ruddy copper. In the standing wheat, pale red splashed the yellow stalks, and an oblique blue shadow marked the bottom of the even wall. Farther back, heat reflections quivered about the plain, and a bluff floated, like a mirage island, in a pool of dazzling light.

"If I were an artist, I'd stick to the old red-Fife; but I've got to be an economist, and I hope to experiment with the new quick-ripening seed," he said. "A miller likes hard grain; a farmer likes a large berry that fills up the bushel. Well, I suppose nobody is indispensable, and when Adam was at Brandon his harvest did not stop.

After all, a bachelor must pay for his freedom. Do you think you could drive a binder, Ruth?"

"Your frankness is rather embarrassing," Ruth rejoined. "In the meantime I have undertaken to run two stores, which is enough for an ordinary young woman."

Bob turned to Mrs. Hope, as if for sympathy.

"An Assiniboine farmer must learn to wait. We advance slowly, but somehow we get there. And do you think I might have a little more lemonade?"

"You may have half a glass. I hate to be parsimonious, but the supply is exhaustible, and Mr. Mellish might arrive. At all events, he inquired if he might look us up, and I stated that he might do so on Sundays only."

"A proper reply," said Bob. "Since one cannot work forever, Canada has some grounds to bless the Methodists and Presbyterians. But have the gossips at the settlement yet found out where Miss Harmon is? I daresay they tried."

"She vanished," said Ruth. "One of Harmon's trustees from Winnipeg was at the store, but he did not know where she had gone, and was frankly vexed about it. I believe he was for some time engaged with Mr. Mellish at the hotel. However, he approved all that we had done."

"Pearl ought to be rich," Hope remarked. "If I were rich, I might buy me an island in the Lake of the Woods and build a sloop; but I expect Martha would like a house on Sherbrook, Montreal, and I do not see the proper compromise. Pearl has, perhaps, a nobler ambition. I daresay it's practicable, and ours is not."

"I believe she at one time thought she might buy a Mounted Policeman," said Mrs. Hope. "But did you not see Ashton, Bob?"

"I was at the guardroom. Mrs. Ashton was keen to go, and we might have got permission, but Tom thought not. My notion was, he would sooner be reconciled when he was not in jail. Anyhow, I thought him rather annoyed than afraid. He certainly was willing for his remarks to annoy the guard."

"His feeling sore isn't strange," said Hope. "If they held me, in order to bluff the proper man, I reckon I might get mad. But did you see McBride?"

"Mack, like Miss Harmon, has vanished."

"I wonder whether it's significant," said Mrs. Hope. "Suppose the object for their vanishing was the same?"

"She has got it!" Hope exclaimed. "I allow that Martha is now and then cleverer than me."

Bob looked the other way, and Ruth tried to be sober. Mrs. Hope's eyes twinkled.

"You mustn't smile. He's really very nice and quite sincere."

"My apology is, I was trying to picture Mack's disgust," said Bob. "Anyhow, if I was for the frontier and thought Miss Harmon behind me, I'd shove ahead as fast as possible."

Ruth agreed. Pearl Harmon was not the sort of girl she wanted for a friend. Her qualities were not womanly, but she had at all events some qualities that become a man. Ruth mused about the plainsmen she knew; Bob and Hope and Ashton, and two or three who bought goods at the store. None had much cultivation, and Bob, perhaps, was remarkable only because he was her lover. Yet they were men one trusted, and at length she admitted she loved Bob. One could not picture him or his friends taking a shabby line; one must acknowledge their indomitable pluck and enduring stubbornness. Theirs was

the type that holds fast and conquers where others might think hope was gone.

"Then a horseman crossed the plain behind the wheat, and Mrs. Hope said:

"It's Tony Mellish. Now his wife and Harmon are not about to steer him, we might tactfully indicate his proper road. Tony himself would like to go where he ought to go, but he soon gets tired. Since he has, no doubt, been investigating, I hope he's repentant. For all that, if he wants to be forgiven, he must be just."

"I imagine I have heard something like that before," said Bob. "*Can a man be pardoned—*? The common-sense and up-to-date reply is: He cannot and at the same time stick to the wad."

Mellish got down, and when he and Hope had put the horse in the stable, joined the group. His look was thoughtful and to some extent apologetic. Mrs. Hope gave him some rather warm lemonade.

"One might think you *worried*, Tony," she said. "You know our friends, and if it's some comfort, they knew Mr. Harmon. If you like, you can state the trouble. By the corner of the house is perhaps the coolest spot, and Adam will give you some tobacco, but I doubt if you'll care for the stuff he smokes."

Mellish sat down and took the plug, stained knife and block of matches Hope supplied. Bob admitted the fellow played up, but when the other rubbed a silent match and a sulphurous smell floated about, he hoped Mellish would like his smoke.

"When you last looked us up, Adam and Bob gave you some information about farming and Western farmers they thought might be useful," Mrs. Hope resumed. "You rather engaged to ponder it. I hope you did so."

"I was forced to consult with my Glencoyne agent, and he looked at things from a different point of view."

"He *would*," said Mrs. Hope. "Mr. Harmon's point of view and ours were certainly not the same, and in the circumstances, we think his was wrong. I wonder whether you are yet sure it is not?"

Mellish hesitated and knitted his brows.

"Let's be frank. Harmon had abilities, and he looked, and planned, in front. I think his main proposition sound: individual effort is wasteful, you must concentrate and cooperate. He talked about linking-up the farms, plowing by steam a straight, long furrow; a pool to hold, or sell, the crop for a standard price; and central control. He admitted he did not expect to see his system properly tried out, but he reckoned it was going to work in the Glencoyne district."

"The central control is the important thing; Harmon hoped to be boss," said Bob. "Well, the plan's as old as Egypt, and I doubt if Joseph first invented it. The courtiers, priests, and scribes were rich and cultivated; the men who grew the wheat were slaves. So long as you claim to be independent, you cannot have perfect economy. Anyhow, I'd sooner keep my freedom, and when you think about it, men from the beginning have fought the *big boss*. I am English, but I know the plainsmen, and I doubt if Canadians, so to speak, would stand for him. We might ask Adam to take the floor."

"All bosses ought to be abolished," Hope remarked. "The Northwest is the small man's country, and central control will not work; in Montana, the nesters are now bucking against the big range owners, and it looks as if they might win. Then concentration is not everywhere economical. I suppose the best cultivation is in some parts

of Belgium and France, where the little farms are run by peasant proprietors. Besides, where every man is usefully occupied all the time you get as near industrial economy as is humanly possible. We have got to be usefully occupied, because if we loaf, we freeze. Then the wheat belt is not a hopeful field for the capitalist; the weather's against him and the risk is large, but the profit's remarkably small."

"For all your labor, you imagine you will not be rich?" said Mellish.

"We know we will not," said Mrs. Hope, in a quiet voice. "If we get one or two more good harvests, we expect we will not again be plunged in debt."

"I like your pluck, ma'am. If we were a theatrical lot, I'd take off my hat."

Mrs. Hope smiled, but she thought Tony sincere. For one thing, she had studied his fashionable wife. Tony had generous impulses, but Martha imagined Mrs. Mellish was frankly out for all that she could get.

"Oh, well, I dare say you mean to be nice, but one mustn't exaggerate, and let's be practical. You see, your recent agent's debtors are our pals, and I believe you have been investigating. Are you satisfied with his stewardship?"

"I admit I'm not," said Mellish rather dryly. "Harmon's methods were not, on the surface, obvious, and I was forced to send for his lawyer trustee and a Winnipeg accountant. For two days we pursued our inquiries; and then I got an awkward jolt. In fact, I have not yet altogether recovered from the shock. I am head of a Montreal merchant house, but, if I may talk like a vulgar Englishman, the prairie storekeeper had done me in the eye."

Bob laughed. "If it's some comfort, Mr. Mellish, you were not the first. When you trade with gentlemen like Harmon, you must watch out."

"I hadn't thought Montreal merchants a rashly trustful lot," Mrs. Hope remarked. "Perhaps I'm unkind, Tony, but to some extent, you deserved it. However, might we ask for some particulars?"

"They are rather intricate. Harmon was our buying broker, and we supplied the money he used for the house's business, but where a transaction was particularly profitable, he used it for his. In fact, the good bargains were Harmon's and the worst were ours. All the same, the fellow was clever and had he lived, his trustee doubts if we could have convicted him of fraud. Now all we can do is to ask for the sums he wrongfully used, and the trustee undertakes to allow our claim. Moreover, he imagines, if Harmon had carried on until his schemes matured, he himself would have paid."

"But what about Miss Harmon?"

"When all is put straight, I expect she will have as much money as a young woman of her type ought to have. We cannot make her accountable for her father."

"I reckon to disentangle things will be some job," Hope remarked. "You state a number of the transactions were yours. When you are through, you will be the mortgagee of one or two of our neighbors' farms."

"That is so. As soon as my accountant and Harmon's lawyer are agreed, I will call a meeting of my debtors; but if Ashton is released and promises to be civil, I will see the fellow first. Our house is a respectable house, and we do not cheat our customers."

"You will not seize the farms?" said Mrs. Hope. "Now

the boys have got a fighting chance, you'll allow them to make good?"

"I'll promise to be just, Martha," Mellish replied. "Where Harmon was not, I might try to be generous. I don't know if all can be put straight, but as far as it's possible—— In fact, I dare say we can draft a scheme that ought to satisfy your friends."

Mrs. Hope gave him a gentle, steady glance, and faint color touched her skin.

"You are a white man. You are the Tony all loved in London, when we were going to be famous artists, and never thought you'd be a merchant, and I a farmer's wife. Well, when I was younger, I used to speak a piece and try to move my audience by the last dramatic line: *Like a prince, he gave the widow the pavilion he had built.*"

Mellish's embarrassment was rather obvious. Mrs. Hope smiled.

"Now it's done with, and Bob has my permission to talk about something else."

"I doubt if I could properly play up, and Ruth promised to take a walk with me," said Bob. "However, if Mellish will allow me, I'd like to wish him good luck."

Ruth got up and they crossed the parched grass behind the stubble where the wheat stooks stood. The sun was getting low, and when they stopped by a bluff the shadows were long and the leaves moved in a faint, cool wind. The slanted beams touched the wheat with stronger color; behind its coppery gold, the plain was going blue.

"Mrs. Hope is a stanch champion, but you kept the Olsen store and held the fort for us," said Bob. "How-

ever, the important thing is, we have won, and when Minna no longer needs you you will be free to undertake a fresh job."

"I suppose that is so. All the same, to know I was needed was rather nice. In a way, I'm sorry the fight is over."

Bob smiled and indicated the spacious landscape.

"The Northwest is a fine country, but it is not a lazy man's paradise, and one, perhaps, must fight all the time. Well, I think you have known the worst, and you were not afraid."

"Ah," said Ruth, "you do not know! When I got down from the cars twelve months since, I was *desperate*. You were kind, and although it's perhaps strange, I was happy at the store."


"You might yet go back to the Old Country. If you stop, in a year or two you will be a frontierswoman for good. You ought to ponder——"

"Do you think I have not?" Ruth inquired. "Suppose I told you I had calmly and deliberately resolved to stop? I have not, of course, all Mrs. Hope's qualities, and at the beginning I was afraid; but I kept the Olsen store open, and Miss Harmon was an awkward antagonist."

"You saw us out nobly. At one time, I thought Adam's wife the finest woman I had been allowed to know; but I afterwards knew another."

Ruth smiled. "Thank you, Bob! As a rule, you are not moved to talk like that."

"I was moved, but I durstn't let myself go, my dear. My part was something like devil's advocate; I must indicate all you might get up against. For example, if



you married a farmer, you would never be rich, although I believe you might help him get some distance ahead."

"You are very just, and I rather hope it's hard," said Ruth. "I don't think I am remarkably greedy, but if you do not want me, I can be Mrs. Olsen's partner."

"My dear!" said Bob, and took her in his arms.

CHAPTER XXX

THE BROKEN TRAIL

THE search for Wilshaw was awkward, and when they camped one night by a smudge fire, Waring and Smithson reviewed the situation. Nobody outside the cities had yet a telephone, and mail-carriers started for back-block settlements but once or twice a week. In consequence, McBride controlled his scattered forces from the Canadian Pacific track, where he could use the telegraph. The line was more or less parallel with the American frontier, and the stations were twenty or thirty miles apart.

Wilshaw, of course, might steal across the track, but it, so to speak, was the danger zone, and Waring imagined he had not yet got there. All the same, the police were not numerous, and the prairie was wide. In the west, a man might hide for some time among the strange, dry ravines that pierced the barren country behind the wheat belt. In the south, at one or two spots, poplars and birches covered the rather high, broken ground the plainsmen called *mountains*. Moreover, on the south side the woods touched the American boundary. For long, one might ride across where one liked, and not know whether one was in the United States or Canada; but the Canadian police and Montana sheriffs must not pass the line.

For the most part, the wide plains were altogether lonely, but at harvest strangers from the south and east roamed about in search of a job; and agricultural machinery agents, doorspring merchants, and other gentlemen

of the road hired rigs at the liveryies. In consequence, Smithson and Waring laboriously trailed a patent-medicine dealer and one or two more who sold pictures and sewing-machines.

Smithson was satisfied Wilshaw had not crossed the track; at all events, he had not done so in the neighborhood their business it was to watch.

"If he hadn't a horse, he could not have made it before we got here," he argued. "So far's we know, he didn't steal another horse, and if he did, I reckon he couldn't ride. Pete's a woodsman, and a woodsman goes by canoe and on his feet."

Waring thought him logical. Then few wheat-belt farmers were horsemen; as a rule, they drove a rig. For all that, Waring saw an objection.

"It looks as if he rode the horse Ashton hired at Walpole," he pointed out.

"Maybe so. I s'pose Mack reckons Pete turned the horse loose so's we find it and get after Ashton. Maybe he got off because he couldn't stay on. Anyhow, if the boys were after me, and the short line to the frontier was stopped, I'd be safer on my feet. I could see them, on their horses, a long way off; ten yards from the spot where I dropped in the grass, they could not see me. When I wanted grub I'd walk right into a settlement and folks would think me a harvester."

Waring nodded, but there was not much use in speculating. They must carry out their orders and trust their luck, and at sunrise they resumed the search. The days were getting short, and when they stopped at a settlement one evening soon after dark it looked as if nobody had gone to bed. Groups of talking people blocked the sidewalk by the poolroom and grocery steps, and some

followed the police to the hotel, where another group disputed on the veranda. When Waring got down, the landlord presented the livery stable keeper, his hostler, and a gentleman whose business was to sell washing-machines.

"You're here in pretty good time; I don't know how you knew," said one.

"We don't know," said Smithson. "We're willing to learn. Suppose one of you states the trouble? The others might stand back."

The commercial gentleman began the narrative. He had, at another settlement hired a rig for a week's tour, and on his arrival left the team at the livery. He did not unload the rig, but he carried one machine to a store where he had arranged to demonstrate its usefulness.

"She does all the work for you, and when you have seen her in action, you'll never again want to use a coal-oil can," he said. "You clamp the wringers down wherever they're handiest and you fix the sheet-zinc draining tray. The tray's all zinc; some makers' stuff is galvanized, but the spelter comes off and then she rusts. The wooden fixings are rock elm; we use Para rubber, and she'll last as long as you live——"

"Maybe so," said Smithson. "But you haven't told us where the trouble is. Did somebody steal her?"

The salesman clenched his fist. "He stole the team, he stole the rig. The d— hobo stole the whole lay-out——"

Waring stopped the fellow and the hostler told his tale.

"About half an hour after dark, a stranger came along and told me he wanted the drummer's team. I said the fellow calculated to stop for the night, and he was holding a washing bee at the store."

"'Looks as if you had no use for washing in this bum town,' he allowed. 'Anyhow, you ain't got the money to buy a high-grade machine.'"

Waring nodded. Sometimes a plainsman did talk like that, and he himself had noted Wilshaw's sullenness.

"Did you see the man?"

"The evening was dark, and when I went for the horses he stopped by the rig. I didn't bring a lantern; we got some light from a window, and if I couldn't see at all, I could yoke a team. Well, we harnessed up and he paid for the horses' feed. I certainly knew he was a stranger, but I thought the drummer had hired him at the last livery yard."

"That's the kind of fool he is," the salesman remarked. "When I drove up to the stable I was alone, but he lets another fellow get away with my team."

Waring cogitated. To harness the horses would occupy them for five or ten minutes, and anybody on the sidewalk would know how they were occupied. Then everybody at the settlement knew the washing-machine merchant demonstrated at the store. Waring liked Wilshaw's nerve, but it implied that the fellow had pretty good grounds for running the risk he ran. He certainly knew his stealing the team would soon put the police on his track.

"What have you done about it?" he inquired.

The hotel-keeper said two men on horseback had started off to search the plain, and another had harnessed the livery trotters and gone for the police. Then a young woman pushed through the group, and when Waring saw it was Miss Harmon he frowned and Smithson swore. She signed them imperiously and they went down the steps and for a short distance along the quiet sidewalk.

"You are 'most an hour too late," she said. "It doesn't seem to worry you, but I guess a policeman's habit is not to arrive on time. Now you're here, I expect you'll stop the night?"

"Not at all," said Waring. "In two or three minutes we take the trail. The awkward thing is, we don't know which trail, and I do not altogether see why Wilshaw risked stealing the drummer's team. I expect you knew he was the man?"

"Why, of course, I knew. He took the chance because he was afraid of me, and I'd now be pretty close behind him, but my horse was plumb used up and the boys wouldn't loan me another. The boneheads reckon they are cleverer than a girl."

Although on one point Waring's curiosity was satisfied, his annoyance did not melt. Miss Harmon was going to be an embarrassment and he had thought he had done with her. On the whole, to think so was some satisfaction.

"Another time, you tried to let Wilshaw go."

"Like the police, I'm sometimes wrong," said Pearl. "This time, I'm following Pete to the boundary, and if he beats you to it, I'll ride across after him."

"In Montana, you are accountable to the Americans. In Canada, you cannot be allowed to meddle, and you must not carry weapons. Have you a pistol?"

"If you want to know, you can search me," Pearl rejoined, in a cool, mocking voice.

Waring shrugged. He knew when he was beaten, and he thought Smithson chuckled.

"I expect you are entitled to hate Wilshaw; but to run him down is our business," he said.

"It looks as if you can't," said Pearl with ominous

calm. "He killed my father. Maybe Pop was hard, but he was the biggest man in Assiniboia, and he was kind to me. There isn't a law in Canada to stop me riding about the plains, and if my horse is fit in the morning, I take the trail. If I hit Wilshaw's, I might send you news. In the meantime, he's shoving along the team he stole, and since you have horses, you can get on a move."

Waring signed Smithson, and in five minutes the lights of the settlement got indistinct. The night was dark, to search was useless, and when Waring's tired horse stumbled on a creek's steep bank he got down. Since trees follow a prairie stream, they had wood and water, and although mosquitoes bothered them, they were soon asleep.

In the morning they pushed on, more or less at a venture, but their luck was good, for when the sun was low they got news of Wilshaw. Two small log houses occupied opposite corners of a half-section, and when the police rode by the wheat a farmer stopped his binder team.

"The fellow you ask for took breakfast with us," he said. "He'd got off the trail in the dark and camped on board the rig; but I reckon he stopped because he thought she might shed a wheel. Well, my neighbor was across to borrow some binder twine, and since I have some blacksmith's tools we fixed the patent hub. The fellow surely had washing-machines, because he sold us two."

"Why'd you want two?" Smithson inquired.

The farmer laughed. "Maria allowed she'd all along wanted a machine like that, and now the harvest was good I'd have to buy her one. Jake allowed if his wife thought mine got ahead of her, she might be mad. Then we'd fixed his rig, and if we took two, he'd cut the price some dollars on the figure in his picture book."

"He might," said Smithson. "Those machines didn't cost him much. But do you know where he went?"

"He started south. Told us he hadn't been round the farms by the Pipestone, and he'd heard about a swell English colony at a place called Carrington. Then he might work right down by the frontier by Moose Mountain. But why do you want him?"

"For one thing," said Smithson, "he stole those machines, and then he stole the rig. If the drummer they belonged to comes along, he might want his washers back."

"They're ours," said the farmer. "You can't force a fellow to pay for the same stuff twice, and the man who'd bluff Maria has surely got some gall. But won't you light down and come to the house?"

"We must keep the trail," said Waring with a smile. "If the drummer gets after you, you might see a Brandon lawyer; but I think I'd send for Sergeant McBride."

He signed Smithson and started his horse, but when the homestead melted in the plain they got down, and Waring lighted his pipe. All round the wide circle, the grass, checkered by fading green and brown, shone in the sunset. Two or three blue woods cut the horizon, and at one spot a wavy line of trees marked a creek.

"To search two or three hundred miles of prairie is an intricate job," he said. "Mack perhaps knows where the others are, but we do not, and since I expect they are scattered about in couples, thirty miles apart, to steal through the net ought not to bother a man whose luck was pretty good."

Smithson nodded. The worst obstacle was, they could not warn the others, and to send McBride word was awk-

ward. Moreover, when he got their message the railroad was his only line of communication.

"The trail is surely broken. While we roamed about from farm to farm Pete drove straight ahead. You might think him twelve hours in front of us, but I guess he's not. His horses were going all night, and they'd soon tire in the sun. My notion is he's hiding up a ravine. A day or two since, I'd have reckoned on his turning the team loose."

"Yes; so far as we know, he hadn't much grounds to think we wanted him, and since we'd inquire for the rig, he'd be safer on his feet. But a day or two since, he would not have stolen the rig."

"That fool girl made the trouble," Smithson remarked.

Waring nodded, and knitted his brows. The police had lost the advantage they, at the beginning, suppositiously enjoyed. Their detaining Ashton implied that they did not suspect Pete, and although he would start for the frontier, he would go cautiously, and do nothing that might suggest he hurried south. In fact, one might calculate on his changing his line and roaming about from settlement to settlement like a harvester. But when he found out that Miss Harmon followed him, he would know speed was important.

To some extent, Waring sympathized with Pearl. She was a frontierswoman, and her code no doubt justified her revenging her indulgent father. Then she had charm; in fact, she had once or twice come near to carrying Waring away. He imagined she had planned to entangle and use him, knowing that to do so might wreck his police career. Now, by alarming Wilshaw, she had perhaps delayed the promotion for which he had hoped. Yet when she was about, he knew himself but flesh and blood.

Waring braced up. He hoped he was not a fool, and he had, once or twice, resolved he would have nothing to do with Pearl. His resolve stood. Moreover, he must concentrate on his proper job.

"We have got to fix where we are going to look for Pete," he said. "He told the farmer he might work down by Moose Mountain to the frontier. Suppose he went the other way?"

There was the puzzle. Wilshaw could choose one of two refuges: in the south, the United States; in the north, the tangled woods. American soil was the nearer, but he must cross the Canadian Pacific track, which he would now imagine the police watched. Moreover, he knew they, before very long, would question his recent hosts.

"Pete would calculate on the farmer's giving us the news," Waring resumed. "I rather think he would expect us to imagine he cheated and meant to swing round north. Since we must bet, I'd sooner bet on his going, more or less, where he said, but he will not steer for Moose Mountain. His line is farther west, across the lonely broken ground on the Missouri *couteau*."

Smithson nodded, and, starting southwest, they looked for a spot where they could camp.

CHAPTER XXXI

WILSHAW MAKES IT

AT THE top of a long incline Waring stopped his horse. In a mile, he had perhaps climbed thirty feet, for where one might think the prairie flat, the ground rolls like the Atlantic in a calm. Waring knew he had reached the summit, because the spot commanded a wider view. The day had been hot, and where the stirrup leather rubbed, his horse's side was white; dust smeared his red coat and stuck to his damp skin. Now at sunset, a faint cool wind rippled the parched grass.

In the west, the sky was luminous red and green, but at one spot a brown haze dimmed the vivid glow, and Waring smelled burning. In the south, blue woods dotted broken ground. Waring was frankly tired; he and Smithson had started soon after daybreak, and when they nooned by a bluff where the first leaves were falling a farmer stopped his horses to talk, and stated that a rig had passed him going south an hour since. He thought the driver was the man for whom the police inquired, and they pushed on as fast as possible. Since Wilshaw's horses hauled a rig, Waring imagined him not far in front, if he was in front. They thought they knew where he was steering, but their line and his might be some miles apart.

"I kind of hoped we'd spot him from the top," said Smithson moodily. "We are near the railroad, and if our last message got through, the boys might watch the track. However, I can't see the telegraph poles. Looks like a big fire three or four miles west."

"With the bluffs for a background, you could not see the poles," Waring remarked. "The country's the sort of country in which Wilshaw might baffle us, but I doubt if he has crossed the track. For a time, I think we'll keep the north side and steer west."

"After all, he might be in front, and if we separate we double our chance of spotting his trail. I wonder where Miss Harmon is. The girl is not a quitter. She allowed she'd follow Pete across the boundary, and I guess she'll stay with it."

Waring started his horse. He was on the other's right hand, and he rode north for two or three hundred yards before he turned west and paralleled his comrade's line. His horse carried rather less weight and perhaps was fresher, for by and by Smithson was a short distance behind him. He imagined they converged obliquely upon the railroad, but for the most part, his glance searched the ground.

The sun had parched the turf and he doubted if the hard soil would carry the marks of wheels. Where short scrub stretched from bluff to bluff, and in sandy belts, wheels would be an embarrassment, but they reckoned Pete was not much of a horseman and he had no saddle. A man who could not ride might drive a team; in fact, Pete, no doubt, would stick to the rig. Moreover, on the whole, the grass was short and the ground was smooth.

When they climbed another incline the light was going, but in the south they saw telegraph poles, and behind the poles small, indistinct woods. In front, rolling smoke, pierced by red and yellow flashes, marked the grass fire's advance, and Waring signaled Smithson to converge more directly on the railroad. Then he looked the other way, and for a moment indulged a triumphant thrill.

All was getting indistinct, but in the northwest, on his

right front, a rig seemed to spring from the grass, as if it had been hidden by the gently folding plain. The driver—steering for the railroad—must cross the troopers' front, and he could not do so on a long diagonal, because the fire was in the west. Yet if he did cross the line and reached the woods, they might lose him in the dark.

"He mustn't make it!" Waring shouted.

His tired horse was his friend, but for once he must be cruel, and they leaped ahead. He heard the feet of Smithson's horse drum on the hard turf, and he felt the wind get cold. The plain began to melt, and one could not search the broken ground in the dark. In front, the smoke, for a few moments, went straight up, and under the long cloud he saw a bright red, wavy line. The rig was between the fire and him, and the horses and driver were black and distinct. The fellow obviously hoped to reach the woods across the track, but the police yet might cut his line and he knew they were authorized to shoot.

He swerved. Waring imagined he was going to turn and drive for the fire's other end. Then the police would be behind him, and as a rule, a chase in which one directly follows a fugitive is long. Wilshaw, however, did not turn; he dared not, for in the north, but some distance off, a horseman Waring had not remarked before rode savagely. Wilshaw's line of retreat was cut; he must try to cross the track between the police and the advancing fire.

Waring heard his horse's feet beat like forge hammers; the stinging smoke got thick, and he was bothered to see where he went. Since he heard Smithson's horse, it looked as if they converged. The fire roared, but the brightest red flashes were now on his right front, and he imagined it burned less savagely at the end by the railroad. The

track was not fenced. At some spots a ditch went along its side; at other spots the roadbed was graded a foot or two above the level of the plain. Wilshaw must cross at a right angle, and when the wheels struck the rails he would get an awkward jolt. Waring hoped something might break.

The smoke got thinner and the flames leaped high. Wilshaw, three hundred yard off, drove squarely for the track; his pursuer was hunched forward over the horse's neck. Waring saw it was not a man but a girl, and for all the strain and speed, he was moved to an admiring thrill. Only Pearl Harmon would force her horse through the heat and smoke behind a desperate man, who, if he were armed, would not hesitate to stop her by a shot. Yet his punishment was not for her; fast as she went, Wilshaw and the police would reach the track before she arrived.

A fresh noise pierced the fire's crackle and the beat of horses' feet. A fan-shaped silver beam swept the grass, and Waring saw a locomotive and rocking box-cars. A freight-train had come up behind the smoke, and some freight-trains were half a mile long. Moreover, none went remarkably fast, and if Wilshaw could get across the track, the police must wait. If he could not, he must give himself up or fight. The fire, Pearl, and the police stopped three sides of the square in which he was enclosed, and the train would roll along the fourth, and yet open side.

Waring did not know where Smithson was. He must fix his eyes on the lurching rig and galloping horses, cut in sharp black silhouette on a flood of silver light. Wheels rolled and the locomotive snorted explosively. He dared not turn his head, and to shoot might cost him a useful two or three seconds. Moreover, his hands were occupied and a man on a speeding horse does not as a rule shoot

straight. Waving one hand towards where he thought Smithson ought to be, he hoped his voice might pierce the turmoil.

"Come on. He cannot make it!"

Wilshaw was obviously going to try. He drove squarely for the track, and Waring, cutting in at an acute angle, vaguely saw cars rock behind the fierce white light. He thought the locomotive a hundred yards off, but the rails were nearer, and if Wilshaw got across, he himself might. It looked as if the fellow vanished, the headlamp blinded Waring, and suddenly all was dark.

In front, wheels clanged, couplings jangled, and wood and iron strained. The noise was like the turmoil of a river when the ice breaks in spring, but somehow Waring imagined the locomotive's snorts had stopped. He perhaps mechanically pulled his horse, or perhaps the animal was wiser than he; but it stood with legs braced, trembling, and the dust from the wheels rolled past them like fog.

Then the cars were gone, and the lights of the receding caboose shone back. Smithson advanced on foot, leading his nervous horse.

"Light down and give me your bridle," he gasped. "I'll try to stop Miss Harmon, and you'll take a look. In a way, Pete made it. Anyhow, he has beaten us."

Waring got down. Since he must draft the report for headquarters, he himself must investigate, but he frankly shrank from his job. He had no light, and to know there was not much use in his rubbing a sulphur match was some relief.

The rig had not struck the track squarely; perhaps at the last moment Wilshaw's nerve had broken, or perhaps the horses had refused. It looked as if the locomotive had

struck the back of the rig and rolled over the horrible wreck.

Waring went back to Smithson, whom Pearl had joined.

"He went under the cars?" she said in a queer, level voice.

"Yes," said Waring. "It's all that you need know."

Pearl pulled off a belt and threw it at his feet. Waring heard a heavy object strike the turf and knew a pistol was in the holster.

"Now I have no more use for it, I hate the thing. If you like, you can have me fined," she said.

She leaned against a telegraph post, as if she went slack. Waring himself was shaken, and to hold Pearl's horse and his was awkward. He and the others were jointly accountable for the horrible wreckage scattered about the line, and although the officers at Regina would support all that he had done, he felt shabby and sick. Then, but for Pearl the fellow might have turned and got away behind the fire. Wilshaw had killed her father, and she, no doubt, was justified by the frontier code, but the job she had undertaken, and carried out, was not a woman's job. Although he admitted he was not logical, he shrank from her.

"They have stopped the freight," said Smithson. "I think she's coming back."

Sparks shot from the locomotive's stack, the tail lights got brighter, and after a minute or two the cars stopped and men carrying lanterns jumped down. Waring went to the caboose and wrote a message for McBride. Since his hands shook and composition was awkward, he was occupied for some time, and when he gave the note to a

brakeman the fellow said they would carry the girl to a station where they must stop for water.

Waring got down from the caboose. The train gang had cleared the track, but he and Smithson must guard the wreck, and he undertook to leave Pearl's horse at the first homestead they reached after they were relieved.

"In the morning I start for Winnipeg, and unless the police send for me, I'm never coming back," she said. "I hate Glencoyne. I'm going to forget the forlorn spot and everybody I knew there."

"Come on, miss," shouted a brakeman. "We are waiting to start her up."

Waring put Pearl on board, wheels rolled and she was gone. He was sorry for her, but when the train's lights vanished he admitted some relief. Smithson and he led the horses across the track and pitched camp two or three hundred yards back. The fire burned most fiercely at its other end and stopped by the gravel in the graded road-bed. For a time they watched the flames move slowly east, and flicker out where a sloo had dried to salt-crusted mud. The night was cold and long, but when morning broke Waring was asleep.

In the lean years there was no wheat pool, and a farmer must as soon as possible sell his crop. When fall melted in Indian summer the humming thrashers' smoke plumes stained the sky, and the long rows of stooks vanished from the fields. But few homesteaders had a barn, and for a time the grain was buried in a straw wheat-bin; and then, when all was thrashed, the long haul to the railroad began. There was not a properly graded road in the territory, and

where the trail crossed a prairie creek one must throw down half one's load at the ravine's top and, dumping the rest on the other bank, go back for the stuff one had left. Nobody, however, grumbled; the important thing was, one had wheat to haul.

On an afternoon of Indian summer Ruth and Bob waited by the track at Walpole. In front of the elevator, dusty, tired horses drooped their heads; steam and smoke floated about the iron tower. Dusty, brown-skinned teamsters smoked their pipes in the grass, and rested, with their backs against the boards, where cool sunshine touched the station-agent's shack. Some had started in the dark from lonely farms, but they must wait for the elevator bands to carry up others' loads. A freight locomotive pushed a row of wheat-cars across the switches; in the distance, a tossing smoke plume advanced across the plain. Ruth thought the settlement rather like an island, where men met, for talk and business, in the wide sea of grass. Then, like ships, their rigs vanished behind the horizon.

By and by the train stopped and Ashton and Mrs. Ashton got down. Jane smiled and gave Ruth her hand.

"We were at Winnipeg for three or four days, and went twice to the opera-house," she said. "Tom bought me an American washer, a clock, and a boxful of good china plates and cups. Wheat is going up, and he said for once we'd be extravagant. Oh, and when we stopped at Brandon, Waring was at the station. He'd got a new uniform, with the stripes on the arm, and he's going north for the winter with a picked exploration patrol. But when are you and Bob to be married?"

"When Bob's wheat is shipped," Ruth replied. "Minna's partner cannot join her for two or three weeks. Perhaps you know Harmon's store is sold? We met the new man,

and Bob thinks him a good sort. But the train is starting and I hope they put out all your goods. It looks as if Mr. Ashton was annoyed with the baggage-man."

The baggage-car rolled by, and a muscular fellow at the door flung back a Parthian jibe. Mrs. Ashton joined her husband by a large and rather damaged box.

"I expect all's here," he said. "The fellow was going to *throw* out the crockery. We had some words about it, but when I tried to get on board, the train was starting."

"You needn't apologize because you were too late," said Jane. "To make trouble is *common*, and sometimes it's expensive. Besides, I really think you have had enough."

"I felt like that not long since," Ashton agreed, and turned to Bob. "In fact, I thought I might get something back on the police, but my lawyer wasn't keen, and, after all, old Mack means well. In Winnipeg I saw one or two brokers at the Board of Trade. Liverpool's buying freely and Canadian wheat hasn't cut the price. I don't know but I mightn't let some stop in the bin, on the chance of getting an extra two or three cents a bushel; if there's much snow one could use a bob-sledge. But I suppose you will soon take a holiday? Part of our load is the clothes Jane bought for your wedding."

"Jane is kind," said Ruth. "To know your friends are stanch is very nice."

Ashton laughed. "You must give us proper notice. All are coming. But for you, Harmon would have seized Minna's store and put the screws on us. You helped her see us out, and soon after you arrived our luck began to turn. Anyhow, we must celebrate the harvest and we want a mascot."

"I hope I'm not selfishly jealous, but Ruth is my mascot," said Bob.

"Mrs. Hope had something to do with your good luck," said Ruth. "She persuaded Mellish to be generous; if she had not, Harmon's debtors might have lost their farms. The boys made a splendid fight, but it really looks as if the women's part was useful."

"I myself did not help much," Ashton admitted with a laugh. "When Mellish tried to interview me I ordered him off my farm. In fact, if he'd stopped and argued I believe I'd have thrown him off."

"Tom plunges," Mrs. Ashton remarked. "However, when you think about all he had borne, you must make allowances."

A bell tolled and sooty smoke leaped from the freight locomotive's stack. Couplings groaned, a brakeman ran along the roofs, and the cars lurched noisily ahead. The bell clanged louder, and the locomotive's snorts got explosive. Teamsters jumped to their feet, and on the hotel veranda men turned their heads to the track. The first wheat was going east, and none had known Glencoyne send off a load like that before.

Clanging and groaning, the cars swung across the switches, the bell stopped, thick smoke streamed back, and the great train triumphantly took the road for the Lakes.

Ruth, her hand on Bob's arm, indulged a queer, emotional thrill. She knew herself and her lover, and she began to know his friends. All were ordinary men and women and none's talents were remarkable. But she knew the strain they had borne, and when hope had vanished they had stubbornly held on. And, by their native pluck and stubbornness, they had conquered.

"Oh, Bob," she said, "there's our apology and our reward! Something we were resolved to do at length is done."

Mrs. Ashton laughed, a happy laugh.

"It's the beginning, my dear. Now our luck has turned, we are going straight ahead, and I suppose nobody yet knows where we will stop."

The long smoke trail got thinner, and the roll of wheels got faint. Bob touched Ruth, and they went off quietly for his team.

THE END

